

Disconnected: The Gathering

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Category: Halo

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2011-10-22 03:16:52

Updated: 2013-09-20 05:32:09

Packaged: 2016-04-27 01:57:16

Rating: T

Chapters: 7

Words: 32,872

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: Ch7: Once separate paths begin to merge. - People from the real world, who play Halo on Xbox Live, find themselves suddenly in the game, with no apparent way home. All they know is they have to try. And the Haloverse is not as it seems.

## 1. Instanced & Disconnected

**\*\*Prelude**

**><strong>\*\*Instanced\*\***

\_Amazing! \_Julie Hymes thought to herself. She reached to the camera on her right and turned it on.

"I never cease to amaze myself," she said, speaking into the camera. "I've actually managed to hack into the Halo master server! After a long and difficult process, which I've mostly documented already, I've managed to get full access to all the settings of the Halo master server. Now, getting access to those settings is one thing, but changing those settings, and maintaining access is something else entirely. That said, I've already started working on a program that will keep up with the encryption algorithms and allow me to make one-click changes. I couldn't have made it this far with out help, so a few thanks are in order."

Julie furrowed her brow. For a second, just for a moment, she thought she saw her monitor flicker. Just around the edges. She hoped her monitor wasn't going out. But, if so, this was good a time as any, still being under warranty.

An alert popped up in her tray. It was her hack detection software. Someone was trying to hack \_into\_ her system. Well, let them try. She now had their information and would soon turn the tables on them!

A sly smile formed on her face as she thought about all the things she could do to someone. She was a master hacker! She hacked the Halo master server, after all!

Julie put her fingers to work and began typing. Her mouse moved at lightning speed. Soon, she was hacking her own way back through spoofed I.P.s, firewalls, proxys, and other avoidance software, some simple, some very advanced.

Not long now! She could taste her sweet revenge. Just another minute, then -

Pain shot up Julie's arms and through her chest, penetrating her head. For a moment it felt as if her entire body were on fire. Then she was on her back. It felt as if she had been electrocuted. That would be impossible with the small amount of electricity that ran into a keyboard!

Even before she opened her eyes, she knew something was wrong. It didn't sound like her bedroom. It sounded like a server room. Julie opened her eyes.

She was in a server room, all right. It had to be the largest she had ever seen. And she had seen a lot. Massive towers stretched as far as her eyes could see, in both directions. She lay in the narrow walkway between the rows. Through the porous doors she saw the hard drives and processors. And another row of servers beyond that. And another. How many, she couldn't even count. This wasn't a server room. This wasn't even a server farm. This was a server \_planet.\_

Julie stood up and looked around. She realized that she was underground. She could discern no direct source of light, nevertheless she could see. It was as if everything has its own luminance. To put this to the test, she placed her hand against a server tower. Despite the fact that the tower was white there was no shadow.

"Julie."

Julie jumped and spun to face the voice that had called to her. An old woman stood ten feet from where Julie had gotten up and now stood, heart racing and gasping for breath. The woman looked to be in her nineties, but very healthy.

"Who-" Julie swallowed. Her voice was high and scratchy, the adrenaline still flushing through her system. A second later she felt calm enough to talk. "Who are you?"

"I am Matriarch," the old lady said. "I am the master AI of what you in the real world think of as the Halo master server. The very server you hacked your way into." The woman pointed at Julie, who couldn't help but flush. She hated being caught at hacking. And she had gotten so good over the years that it was an infrequent thing. And because she had learned to use proxys, anonymizers, firewalls, and the like, she usually skated anyway. "But, not to worry. I didn't bring you here to turn you over to the authorities. I brought you here because I need your help.

"Until recently my system has been secure from hackers and the like. Lately, as you have proven, my defenses are getting old, and lack of proper maintenance has led to more successful attacks against my system. So far, between my efforts and those of the real world programmers, we have kept out most intrusions.

"I realized that bringing in people from the real world was the best option I had for performing the maintenance to my system at the speed required to overcome the intrusions."

Julie was having some trouble grasping what the woman was saying. Because it sounded as if- But that would be impossible.

"Let me see if I have this correct." Julie rubbed her hands together, as was her habit when she did deep thinking. "You brought me here to modify your programming to make you more resilient to hackers?"

The woman nodded. "Correct."

"And, where is here?"

"You might call this the digital world. I have brought you here, physically, onto the server. What you see is only a digital representation of data. A type of interface."

Julie slowly nodded. "Right," she said, looking around at the endless servers. "How do I wake up?"

The old woman just looked at Julie. If there was any hint of a joke, she didn't detect it. It appeared the only option was to play along until she woke up. Maybe hacking the Halo server was part of the dream as well. That would piss her off if she remembered it when she woke.

"Okay," Julie said. "Where do I start?"

The old woman opened the door to the nearest server and motioned for Julie to join her. When Julie looked inside all she saw was a helmet. It floated in the air and appeared to be attached to nothing.

The old woman reached inside and took the floating helmet and held it out to Julie.

"What did you say your name was?"

"I am Matriarch. I am the master artificial intelligence."

"Right." Julie slowly took the helmet and slipped it over her head.

"With this," Matriarch said, "you will have instant access to my source code. Any modifications you want to make, you can make instantly, just by thinking."

Julie smiled. \_So much better than writing my own piece of software!\_

**\*\*Chapter 1**  
**><strong>\*\*Disconnected\*\***

"Take the shot!"

Anna Ryan looked around. She was in the middle of a field. But how she got there, she had no idea.

"Take the shot, dammit!" A woman screamed at her. Anna looked around, trying to determine where the voice was coming from.

\_I'm wearing a helmet\_, she realized. She looked down at herself and realized she was wearing an armor suit. And she had a rifle in her hands.

"What are you waiting for? Take the shot!" the woman screamed again.

Anna looked through the scope on the rifle. Through it she saw a large deer, head down grazing. She lined up on where she thought the heart should be and squeezed the trigger.

The rifle bucked in her arms, but her suit absorbed the shock. Through the scope she saw the deer take one step, attempting to run, then fall forward, rolling sideways, dead.

Anna stood up and looked for the deer. All she saw was field, as far as the eye could see.

She looked down at the rifle she still held. Something in her brain began to tick. \_I know this rifle. This armor I'm wearing. But...that's not possible\_.

Anna let her rifle fall to the ground and grabbed her helmet, holding her head as a sharp pain shot through. She remembered something. Something small, but important. It didn't even make sense. None the less, she knew it was a memory.

She remembered the sensation of electricity. Of being electrocuted, perhaps? \_No, that can't be right.\_ She was holding a game controller when it happened. Maybe there was some kind of short in the controller that shocked her.

Was she dead? Had her Xbox killed her, somehow? She could see it now. The first person killed by an Xbox. That would make some headlines!

If she was dead, then why was she here? Is this what heaven is like for her? That didn't make sense. \_Yet, here I am.\_

Anna caught movement to her right. Quickly, she reached down and grabbed her rifle, turning to see what was coming for her. Was it another deer? Scared by the report of her rifle, running randomly away and not even seeing her until too late?

It was a soldier, dressed in armor just like hers. Through the helmet Anna saw the face of a young woman.

"How come you hesitated? You had a clean shot." The name QUAID was stenciled on the woman's armor above her heart. Stenciled above that was her rank insignia.

Anna shook her head. This was impossible. She knew she wasn't dead, but there was no way she could be here.

Dreaming! That must be it. \_I've fallen asleep playing Halo again. This is all a dream, and I'll wake up to find I've been disconnected.\_

Deep down, Anna knew that wasn't right either. This was no dream. It was too vivid. She wasn't just going to wake up.

Disconnected.

The word struck her like the hand of God. Anna began to get that feeling in her gut, like she was going to puke.

\_DISCONNECTED.\_

For some reason, that word meant everything to her at the moment.

\_I've been disconnected!\_

Where had that thought come from? What did it mean? Anna's head began to swim. She was getting dizzy. She was going to faint. She was going to puke.

Anna pawed at her helmet, twisting it left, twisting it right, her hands slipping. Finally the helmet came off. The woman called QUAID was reaching for her, saying something. Anna couldn't hear. Her ears were ringing.

Anna doubled over as her stomach clenched and she threw up at Quaid's feet. The other woman jumped back, trying to avoid having vomit sprayed on her armor. Her stomach heaved again. Hot, burning bile flowed up her throat, through her teeth, through her nose.

\_Jesus Christ, I've been disconnected! Disconnected from Xbox Live! What does that even mean? I don't know! I've been transported into Haloverse. I need to get home. Get reconnected.\_

Tears flowed down Anna's cheeks as she dry heaved, gulping for breath, at the end of heaving up whatever she last had to eat.

"Yuki!"

Anna's ears had stopped ringing. She heard the other woman say something.

"Yuki!"

Anna looked around, expecting another person. There was no one. It was still the two of them. Why was Quaid saying Yuki? It sounded like a name. Looking up at Quaid, Anna could see the worry in her eyes. She was reaching for Anna again.

"Yuki, are you all right?" Quaid asked as she placed a hand on Anna's shoulder. Anna couldn't feel the touch through the armor, just as she hadn't felt the recoil of the rifle.

"Who's Yuki?" Anna asked.

Quaid looked at Anna as if the question made no sense at all. "What do you mean?"

"I think you keep calling me Yuki."

"That's your name," Quaid said.

Anna shook her head. "My name is Anna."

Anna saw Quaid's eyes shift for a second to her own suit, where her name and rank were stenciled. She looked down and saw her own name and rank there. Only, it wasn't her name. Nor was it the name and rank of her Halo character. Written above her heart was the name ORIMOTO.

Yuki Orimoto? Why am I called that here? I've never even heard that name before.

"Maybe," Quaid said, "we should call someone. Jacob! He'll know how to help!"

"Who's Jacob?"

"You know, Jacob." Anna just looked at Quaid. She had no idea who Jacob was. "Our friend, Jacob, the doctor."

"A doctor?" Maybe that's what she needed right now, a doctor.

"They heal people," Quaid said weakly, quietly. Looking at Quaid, Anna was getting the impression that she was starting to think this was some prank. Except for the puddle of processed lunch on the ground at their feet, which she kept eyeballing.

"And I know this man?"

"Uh, yeah. You two grew up together." Quaid was humoring her now. "Let's go back into the city. I'll call him on the way."

Anna looked off into the distance behind Quaid. For the first time she saw the city. It was a large city, but looked abandoned. Then she noticed the giant structure rising from what appeared to be deep with in the city.

That's the space elevator! I know where this is.

New Mombasa. That's where the space elevator was. So, this had to be Africa. Kenya.

Anna bent down and picked up her helmet and rifle. "Lead the way."

Two Mongoose vehicles were parked nearby. Quaid was leading her toward these. "You do remember how to ride one of these, right?"

#

Standing in the back seat of the troop transport, Rick Carter surveyed the city before him through binoculars. It looked abandoned. No lights. No smoke. Nothing to indicate any kind of life was here at all. He looked down at the man sitting in the driver's seat in front of him.

Lieutenant Westlake was a distinguished officer in the UNSC. An

experienced sharpshooter and a respected officer, Westlake had access to resources that Carter and his team could never get their hands on. Resources he needed in setting up his not-so-little operation, which apparently now had a base of operations.

"Nice discovery, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir." Even sitting down, Montgomery Westlake was an intimidating man, making the seat he was sitting in look small. In the real world, Carter was just over six feet. Monty, as Westlake's friends called him, was a full head taller, and was built like Arnold Schwarzenegger

Carter turned to the man sitting in the passenger seat. Byron Roth, in contrast, was half a head shorter than Carter. An UNSC officer, Roth was no weakling, however. In the few short weeks he had been here, Carter had seen Roth in action. He was very athletic and a great wrestler. "You're sure it's all still there?"

"Oh, yes," said the short blonde. Roth had removed his helmet and placed it between his feet. "I networked in before we left. Took some doing, but I managed. And I placed some safeguards in the system that will let me know if anyone accesses it. Physically or by terminal."

"Do you know where it's housed?"

"I do. I was able to access a map and a schematic as well. All we need to do is go there."

Carter dropped his binoculars into their protective casing and sat down again. "Okay. Let's find this place."

#

Anna followed Quaid, whose first name was Kara, she managed to find out, back to a warehouse in the middle of the city, after spending a minute figuring out the controls. There Kara had called Jacob, who had said he was on his way.

Something kept sticking in Anna's brain. A little itch that said there was something she ought to know, but was not seeing. She tried several times to guess what it was. Of the many obvious things, such as she shouldn't be here in the first place, none of them fit. It remained and continued to grow. And she let it, eventually giving up on the guessing and turned to something more important.

It was obvious to her now that she was stuck here. This was not a dream. Not an illusion. She didn't do drugs or smoke pot or anything like that, so she didn't see how she could be hallucinating. What she needed, then, was to find a way back home. Out of this impossible universe and back to the real world. To get reconnected.

To do that she would probably need to scour this universe and find anything that didn't fit. Others that had been disconnected, for example. That would provide her a basis to work from. How was she, or they if there were others, brought here. Could that same mechanism get her, them, home?

And that meant learning about this universe. Learning to travel in

this universe. Learning to live in this universe. Learning to use equipment and vehicles in this universe.

She would start with her suit. In the real world it was just a HUD on her television screen. Here it was something she was actually wearing. She could feel the slight weight of it as it snuggled her in all the right places, tailor made for her.

\_Tailor made for Yuki Orimoto, actually\_. Who is Yuki Orimoto? Or, who \_was\_ Yuki Orimoto? Did she still exist? Or had she died when Anna took over her body? Another thing Anna added to her mental list. \_Find if there's a way to revive the original personality.\_

In the mean time, with a bit of reluctant help from Kara, Anna managed to learn both the standard eye tracking based menu in her helmet, and the manual hand operated backup mounted in the arm of her suit.

Afterward, without much to talk about, Kara had gone to one of the windows to look out. Anna went to join her, trying to think of some valid question to break the awkward silence that sat between them. As she looked outside, her eyes came to rest on the giant space elevator dominating the skyline from their position.

Again it struck her as odd. This \_was\_ New Mombasa. And this \_was\_ where the elevator had been built. She was sure of that. If nothing else, the huge bridge they crossed to get to the island told her that.

So what was so odd about it? This is where the Master Chief had fought a scarab. Where Sadie had tried to save her father. Then it hit her. What she had been missing. The thing she had forgotten. It was staring her in the face the whole time.

"I thought this city had been glassed."

"What?" Kara looked at Anna as if she had just woken up.

"I thought the Covenant glassed New Mombasa. This entire area," Anna pointed through the window.

"Well, clearly not. That's only a legend anyway. The Covenant might be powerful, but there's no way they have the power to completely destroy entire cities."

That didn't make sense. Anna clearly remembered the cutscene in which the Covenant were glassing Mombasa. Why should it be different here? Maybe there was more to the Haloverse than just some Cheetos covered keybanger making up history on the fly. Maybe, just maybe, Halo had a life all its own. \_Another mystery to uncover.\_

Anna was going to ask about Reach when a small aircraft flew overhead and landed on the roof of the warehouse. "That'll be Jacob," Kara said.

#

"You said this city was abandoned!" Carter yelled at Westlake. A small UNSC craft had just flown overhead and landed somewhere in the city on the island. If there were people here who discovered what



they were up to that would fuck everything up! Especially if those people happened to be UNSC troops!

"It is." The calm in Westlake's voice didn't go unnoticed by Carter, who pointed in the direction the aircraft had flown.

"Then what the fuck are they doing here?"

"No one has any orders to be here. I checked on that before selecting this location. And no one is interested in it. If anyone is here, it's on their own time. Not in any official capacity." Westlake turned to Byron, who looked back at him. "And you know what means."

Byron nodded and smiled. "Accidents happen. Ships sometimes crash on take off and everyone on board dies."

Both men looked back at Carter. He liked where they were going, but to cause a crash and kill people, soldiers, would mean an investigation of some kind. If they were going to do it, they need to be prepared to hide afterward. Which meant finding the facility they were looking for first. Only then could he rest somewhat assured that they probably would not be discovered. And if they found the facility without being discovered by the troops there, there would be no need to crash the transport in the first place. All of this he told to the two men in front. They just shrugged and Westlake continued driving.

#

The roof creaked and groaned, and bits of ceiling fell down on Anna, as the transport landed, the engines whining down. How it kept from collapsing, she couldn't guess, but it seemed a safe bet that if they had landed there before, it would hold again.

Anna and Kara waited at the bottom of a freight elevator shaft for Jacob. Anna got her first good look at him when the door slid up. He was a short, fat man, with a thin mustache and short hair, dressed in regular military camo. Around his waist he wore several pieces of equipment, which Anna supposed were medical in nature, and a sidearm.

"Kara tells me you're having some problems," Jacob said. The emotions on his face were somewhere between concern and disbelief. Anna didn't expect him to believe her. She would probably have never believed it if a friend had suddenly told her that they were someone else who had been forced into their body.

"That's a bit of an understatement. I don't expect that anyone will believe me, but my name is Anna Ryan. Somehow I have been...transferred into this body."

Jacob nodded, his arms folded across his chest. "Transferred from where?"

"The real world," Anna said. Jacob nodded. "Where I come from, this place," Anna gestured around her, "this universe, is just a story written by some well paid people in an office somewhere. It's a video game that people play."

Jacob looked at Kara, who shrugged. It was the first Anna had told her of this. "You know her better than I do. I thought it was a joke at first. Even when she puked on me."

"Almost puked on on you," Anna corrected.

Kara pointed to her boot. "No, there's some right there."

"Okay," Jacob looked from Kara to Anna, "joke or not, this isn't funny. If you're playing some kind of joke, Yuki, you need to stop."

Anna threw her hands up. "I'm not! This is no joke, and I'm not Yuki Orimoto! This may be Yuki's body, but I'm Anna Ryan up here!" Anna pointed to her, or Yuki's, head. "I don't know what's going on any more than either of you. All I know is I've been disconnected from Xbox Live and I'm here. And that somehow, some way, I need to find a way home. I'm not meant to be here."

Jacob put his hand on Anna's arm. "Okay. If you really are someone else in Yuki's brain, then let's go back to the ship. I have Yuki's latest neural patterns on file. I can take a simple reading and compare. If you really are someone else, then we'll know. And after that, I know a few people you can talk to." Jacob began to lead her toward the elevator.

There it was again. That tug at the back of her head, telling her something wasn't right. Something about the way Jacob was talking to her. Leading her toward the elevator. Something in his tone of voice.

"I know some very good people, friends of mine, specialists, that can help us find out what is going on."

Jacob talked to her as if she were five years old. Like you'd talk to someone you didn't want to upset, because you wanted them to do exactly what you want. \_Not really a surprise, since he now thinks I'm crazy!\_

There went the tug again. Jacob thought she was crazy. And he's a doctor. Talking to her like a mental patient. \_That must be it! He wants to turn me over to mental doctors and lock me away somewhere!\_ \_It all made sense. The offer to have her talk to some specialists he knows. The offer to scan her brain. It all made sense.

Anna was almost to the elevator. Another two steps and she'd be in. Nothing to stop Jacob from taking her to wherever he was going to take her. Running test after test. Keeping her from doing what needed to be done to get home.

One more step. But what else could she do? She had nowhere to go, In this entire fictional universe, she had nobody to rely on. Nobody that knew her as anyone but Yuki Orimoto. A space soldier.

Anna felt herself stop on the threshold of the elevator. She had no idea why, but her body just stopped moving. She couldn't feel Jacob's touch on her suit, but could feel it being tugged as Jacob tried to move her. He was saying something in that condescending tone, but she couldn't hear him Her ears were ringing again.

She looked from Jacob to Kara, who was still looking worried. That expression hadn't changed since they met. Anna wondered if she had anything but worry in her. She was a soldier, for Christ's sake! Grow some balls!

She felt Jacob pull her this time. If he yanked any harder he might actually succeed in getting her in the elevator, even if it meant dragging her off her feet. Her eyes didn't see him though. They were still looking in the direction of Kara. Behind Kara she saw the Mongoose ATVs. She could ride one of them. Get out of here. Go somewhere. Somewhere where Jacob couldn't find her. Couldn't drag her to an asylum.

Anna heard Jacob yelp as she almost pulled him off his feet. She sprinted past Kara, who stepped back, not wanting to get run over, and made for the ATVs. What she was going to do, where she was going to go and hide, she had no idea. She would figure all that out later. Right now she just had to get away.

Anna leaped on to the Mongoose and pressed the start button. It roared to life between her legs, drowning out Jacob's protests and shouts at Kara to stop her. She gunned the throttle. The tires spun briefly then caught, the Mongoose leaping forward, right past Kara, and through the still open warehouse door into the city.

**\*\*Author's Note\*\***

Credit goes to guys at Fire Fly Machinima for coming up with the original idea.

## 2. A I

**\*\*Chapter 2\*\***

><strong>A.I.<strong>

Anna turned left and accelerated. Glancing over her shoulder she saw Kara do the same. Apparently Kara wasn't as chicken shit as Anna believed. She had barely made it a block before she heard Kara in her helmet, asking her to come back. When she had looked back, Kara had mounted the other Mongoose and was chasing her. Since then, Anna had tried to evade her.

\_I'm not going back! Not to some crazy house!\_

Kara had kept up so far, pleading from time to time for Anna to turn around and go back with her. It was starting to grind on Anna's nerves, and it was all she could do to ignore her. \_Should have asked her if there is a mute on this thing!\_

Anna turned again, this time down an alley. The roar of the Mongoose in the narrow alley would have been deafening if not for her helmet. As it was, she could no longer hear Kara. Dodging trash bins, fire escapes, parked cars, and other things, she didn't have time to look back and see how close Kara was.

At the end of the alley she turned again. "Shit!" Anna squeezed her brakes. She had turned right into the path of another vehicle. Upon seeing her, they, too, had screeched to a halt. She could see three people inside. Her first thought was that Jacob had called for backup

and that she was caught for sure. Kara couldn't have been too far behind.

Anna looked back over her shoulder, expecting to see Kara waiting just down the street, where the alley ended, cutting off her retreat. However, there was no Kara. She looked to the vehicle in front of her again, trying to read the men inside. That they were still in the vehicle, and not climbing out trying to apprehend her, made her wonder if she had been right.

The man in back stood up. "Hello."

Anna waved back, and nodded. She put her Mongoose in gear and started to slowly pass the men.

"Hang on a second, please." Anna stopped next to them. "I'm just curious, but was that your aircraft that flew over a few minutes ago?"

"In a manner of speaking. They were here for me." It was hard for Anna to tell whether to trust them or not. The two in front wore UNSC uniforms, but the man in back wore what looked to be civilian clothes. He must be someone important if he has a military escort.

"Here for you?" Anna saw the gears turning inside the man's head. "I take it that since you're not still with them that you're running from them." The man sat down and leaned over the side of his vehicle, eying Anna like the cat that caught the proverbial rat. "That would explain the glances backward and the careless driving."

Anna looked away, trying to decide if she was going to run now, or wait. These men didn't seem all on the level, either. She hadn't intended them to think she was a fugitive, since they might call for reinforcements, but that's what the man in the back was leaning toward. As if reading her mind, he smiled a big easy going smile.

"Hey, we don't care what you did. Or didn't do, as the case may be. If you want to keep on running, fine by us. If you want a place to hide, however, I can offer that."

A place to hide? Did they have a place around here? She thought New Mombasa had been deserted. If they did have a place, that would give her an opportunity to gather her thoughts and decide what she wanted to do next. Maybe in the process, these men could help her. If they were as shady as they seem, they probably had means to get off the planet, and from there Anna could find her own way. Somehow. "Give me five minutes to ditch this thing," she said, "and I'll be right back."

The man nodded and held up his hand. "See you in five."

Anna turned the Mongoose around and headed back for the alley. Somewhere in the alley is where she had lost Kara. She wanted to be sure Kara hadn't had a bad accident and gotten hurt. Or killed herself.

As Anna entered the alley she could see a fire up ahead that hadn't been there before. She gunned the Mongoose and made for it.

As Anna had been afraid, when she approached the fire she saw it was Kara's Mongoose. Kara had apparently crashed into the back of a car, sending her Mongoose tumbling and catching fire. But there was no sign of Kara.

Anna hopped off her Mongoose and made a quick search of the area, not finding Kara, or her body. Maybe Kara had survived and was hoofing it back to the warehouse. Whatever the case, Anna started hoofing it herself back to the men she had just met.

#

Carter watched the woman turn her ATV around and drive back into the alley. As soon as she was out of sight Westlake turned to him.

"What are you doing?"

"Eliminating a problem."

"How?" Byron asked.

"We're looking for technology used to make smart A.I.s, right? Seems to me it would be nice to have someone to test it with. Something we were going to have to do, anyway. And who's going to miss a fugitive?"

"Somebody's looking for this fugitive. And what will they think if and when they find her?" Westlake said, and Byron nodded in agreement.

"Who cares! We'll dump her body somewhere after we're done and if, or when, they find it, we'll be long gone! They can investigate until the fucking skies open and God himself comes down to earth. Or whatever the equivalent in this place is." Carter sat back with a huff, conversation over.

No wonder The Voice had made him second in command. He had to do all the thinking. He took another deep breath and sighed. Not only was he mad at the idiots in front, he was mad at himself for losing his temper at the idiots in front. He needed to keep his short temper in check if he was going to do his job efficiently.

He took another breath. Time to put his game face on. The woman had come out of the alley and was jogging back to them. Carter put his hand out as the woman came next to the vehicle and helped pull her in the back with him.

"Rick Carter." He held on to her hand, shaking it.

The woman responded in kind. "Anna Ryan."

"Not Orimoto?"

Anna took a breath. She had hoped he hadn't noticed. "Long story."

Carter smiled his most charming smile. "Try me. We have the time."

#

Everything hurt. Then you'd expect that after crashing at high speed into a parked car.

Kara had followed Yuki into the alley, trying to keep up. Yuki had been too much for her, however, swerving at full throttle around the parked cars. Her senses had been more than a match for Kara's, who was never able to rely on her reflexes.

With all the noise from their Mongooses, Kara knew that Yuki had been unable to hear her. And as Kara had swerved around a large trash bin she hadn't been able to avoid the car on the other side. Her Mongoose had run up the back and pitched sideways, throwing her into the wall, where she had lost consciousness.

Kara tried to sit up, to roll sideways, or otherwise move, but her body wouldn't respond. It was all she could do to breathe at the moment. The only parts of her body that seemed to respond were her fingers and toes, so she knew that she wasn't completely paralyzed.

Kara could hear her Mongoose burning not far away. She just lay where she was, gathering her strength. But not for long. Soon, maybe a few minutes later, she heard another sound. It was another Mongoose. It must have been Yuki. In this abandoned city, there was only one other Mongoose. Only one other running vehicle period. It stopped just outside where she was, the engine shutting off. She heard the passenger climb off.

Kara opened her eyes and looked around. Her neck was stiff and her head hurt like a hangover, but it was enough to see that she had ended up in a dumpster. In here there was no trash. She was laying all the way at the bottom. She could see the darkening sky above her.

She reached up with her right arm, willing it to move. Willing the rest of her to move. The arm was the only thing that responded.

"Yuki." Her voice was weak, hoarse. She swallowed and tried again, barely managing anything above a whisper the second time around.

Her coms! Kara looked to the spot on her helmet where the eye tracking system should activate her coms. But nothing happened. Her suits systems must have been damaged in the impact.

Feeling stronger now, Kara managed to use both of her arms to push herself into a sitting position. Kara could hear Yuki outside, searching around. Probably searching for her. But why should she? Why did she even come back in the first place?

Kara was going to call out again, feeling stronger, but she heard Yuki start running away, her footsteps fading as she jogged down the alley. Forcing herself to stand up, holding the side of the bin for support, Kara saw Yuki run down the alley in the direction she had originally driven, trying to avoid Kara. She had left her Mongoose behind. Again why?

Kara didn't want to think about it right now. She just wanted to get

Yuki and get her some help. The poor woman had lost her mind and thought she was this Anna person.

She forced herself up and over the side of the bin, falling flat onto the pavement outside with a smack and a grunt. Parts of her still hurt, and would for a time to come. After breathing for a second, getting her senses and strength back, she climbed on the spare Mongoose and started driving toward the end of the alley. She went slow, knowing that she could easily catch Yuki, who would be on foot. There was no hurry to end up in another dumpster. With night approaching, however, she couldn't waste too much time. It would be easy to avoid being seen in the dark.

Before Kara got half way to the end of the alley, she got a shock. Another vehicle drove by. Where had they come from? She thought the only people in this entire area were herself, Jacob, and Yuki. Apparently she was wrong. What if Yuki was pretending to be insane and had hooked up with these people? It would be in her best interest to not be seen by them. She would follow them, if she could, and see where they led her. Then she could go back and tell Jacob and they would decide what to do.

Kara twisted the throttle on the Mongoose, slowly pulling out and following the troop transport, making sure to keep her distance and avoid being seen. The twilight and coming night would make it easier to follow without being seen.

#

Anna jogged back to the car with the three men she had just met. As she got closer she realized that the headlights were on. She climbed in the back, with the help of Carter, and took off her helmet, looking at the sky. It was the first time she had really seen it. And now it was getting dark.

The concept that it was getting dark hit her. Until now she had not really thought about things in this universe as being dynamic. Playing the game it was always day or night unless you switched levels. Here, it was something tangible. \_Makes me wonder what else I've not thought of, or have overlooked.\_

Having introduced themselves, she was aware Carter was watching her, probably waiting for an explanation to her running from other soldiers. She looked at him and realized he was quite handsome. \_For a game character, I suppose. \_He was smiling a charming smile, probably trying to charm her story out of her.

Anna smiled back. "You want to know why I'm on the run? You're gonna think I'm insane. They do, the people chasing me." Anna pointed to herself. "The person you see before you is Yuki Orimoto. But up here," she gestured to her head, "is the personality of Anna Ryan. My personality. How I ended up here, I don't know. The last thing I remember before being here was being at home playing a game. And now a couple of Yuki's friends want to lock me up, thinking I'm still her and that I've gone insane."

"You feel like you've been disconnected."

Anna felt the blood rush to her face. There was no way he could \_ever\_ have guessed that. As if reading her face, and perhaps he had,

he took her hand in his and smiled a more knowing smile, though no less charming.

"I've met several others that have said almost exactly the same thing. They're at home, playing Halo on Xbox Live and, after what feels like being electrocuted, they find themselves here, in the game."

The car came to a halt outside a glass building. Anna didn't really notice it, though.

"We're here," announced Byron. The three men got out, Carter helping Anna again. And a good thing, too. After giving orders to get inside, Carter turned back to her.

Her head was foggy with this new information. She was having trouble just standing there. There were others? Her heart beat faster. \_There are others here!\_ "You've met them? These people?"

Carter nodded. "I have. Several of them. And if accounts are right, there are even more. That's one of the reasons we're here. Do you know anything about how smart A.I. are created?"

Anna had to think for a minute. She had read somewhere that smart A.I. were created using the neural patterns of recently deceased people. And that if it were to be used on a living person, it would essentially kill them. "Yeah, a little. I've read about it."

"Well, there's a theory amongst a small group of people, of which we're apart," Carter gestured to himself and the two men with him, "that using the same technology used to create smart A.I. we might be able to send you and the others back home."

Anna smiled. She'd been here only a few hours, and the thing that had been on her mind the entire time was how to get back home. It had been, and was still, a calling to her. Something she knew she had to do. Now, it seemed, there might be a way.

Anna heard a beep. She and Carter turned to see the door of the building slide open. Inside the lobby was dark, the only light coming from hand-held lights the three men had on them and the car.

The lobby was all marble, blue in color from what Anna could tell. A long desk sat to the left of the door. It looked like a receptionists' desk. There were no computers, as far as Anna could tell. If the city had been abandoned in a hurry, would they have taken the computers? Leaning over the top of the desk, the only thing that appeared to have been left behind was a small light mounted approximately every three feet. It looked like a miniature fluorescent light of some kind. A small button on the side is what apparently turned it on and off.

Anna pressed the button. It was just a whim and she didn't expect anything to happen. Instead, a holographic display came to life. She jumped back, startled. The display was a projected keyboard on the desktop and a three dimensional display where there should have been a monitor.

At the burst of light from the hologram the three men wheeled to look at her. "What did you do?" asked Carter.



Anna stammered for words and gestured at the hologram and device. "I...well...just...pushed the button." The pounding in her chest was starting to slow down, now that she knew what it was she had done.

Carter walked over and looked at the hologram and the device. He smiled at Anna. "Just a simple computer." He turned to the two other men. Byron was using a hand held device, not unlike a large PDA or iPhone. Carter opened his mouth to say something when the lights in the lobby came on. "Thank you."

Anna looked back at the holographic computer. Carter saw her looking. "It's just a computer," he said.

Anna shook her head. "Where I come from computers still have physical keyboards and monitors that display in two dimensions."

"Wow. We haven't had anything like that in over four hundred years."

"In my world," Anna said, "Halo takes place over five hundred years in the future." The thought of five centuries of history separating her and what she knew as home, what this game knew as history, made her nostalgic. Carter had said there might be a way home. He never said that it would work. For all she knew, she was trapped here. It was a bit overwhelming, all these aspects of Halo she had never thought of before.

Carter must have caught the blank stare in her eyes. He put an arm around her shoulders. "Come on," he said. "Let's see if we can get you home." Anna smiled as he led her down a hallway, where the two other men had already gone.

#

Kara followed Yuki and the three people she had met as they drove their way through the city. She was careful to make sure that as dark approached she had turned the Mongoose's headlights off. And she stayed far enough back to prevent them from hearing her engine.

After several minutes of driving Yuki and her friends had stopped outside a building with a square sign and blue lettering. The sign proudly proclaimed this building the offices of Interstellar Technological Solutions, InTech.

The company was somewhat familiar to Kara. They were one of the big companies that had a big military contract. Of the various contributions to the military, the one they were probably most known for was the smart artificial intelligence technology. Kara didn't understand how smart A.I. were created, but she had read something about human virtualization and copying brain patterns.

She didn't know what was so important about it that Yuki would have to lie about being insane to meet some people in secret, but if it was that important it was worth checking into.

Kara turned the Mongoose around, driving back to the warehouse to meet Jacob. There they would decide what to do. She was all in favor

of calling for backup and going straight in, asking them what they were doing.

Probably stealing technology to sell, is what. Some of the things in that building would be worth a shiny credit.

A few minutes later Kara drove into warehouse, where Jacob was still waiting. She told him about crashing her Mongoose and following Yuki to the InTech building. About her suspicions.

"I don't know. That doesn't sound like Yuki to me."

"What if she's not the same Yuki you remember growing up with? It's not like you talk to her every day. Maybe she's fallen in with some bad people."

Jacob shook his head. "I just can't see that. Not from Yuki." Kara could see that Jacob was just going to refuse to believe that Yuki had changed from the Yuki he remembered.

"Why don't we call for some backup and go see what they're doing?" She suggested.

"Well," Jacob after a second, "we don't have time to wait for backup. If she met them here, then they have their own way out of here and would be long gone before anyone arrived. I think we need to just go ourselves, and see if we can find out what they're doing."

Kara nodded. "Okay. Hop on. I'll drive us there."

#

Carter led Anna down several flights of stairs to a room. Hardly larger than a bedroom, the only things in the room were several holographic computers on one side, and a machine that looked like a server tower on the other. Carter walked into the center of the room

"This," he said, "is an InTech scanning facility. It takes the neural pattern from a deceased person and makes a smart A.I. out of it." Carter took one of the chairs from the two computers and wheeled it over to the server tower. "What we aim to do, however, in your case, is separate the two neural patterns in your brain and sent the right one home. At least, that's the theory. We've never scanned a disconnected person before, so we have no idea if that's even possible."

Carter turned to Byron sitting in the other chair at one of the active computers. "Are we ready?" The man looked back and gave a thumbs up and a nod. "Anna, if you'll have a seat, please."

Anna sat down, feeling butterflies in her stomach. So many things raced through her mind. Will it work? What if it didn't work? These things were used on dead people because they would kill a living person. A normal living person, at least. If they were right, if there were two personalities in her head, could they separate them? Would they even detect them?

Carter opened the tower next to her. Inside Anna saw just a small metallic helmet, apparently floating in the air, attached to nothing.

It reminded her of a Roman helmet, or something similar, you might see in the movies. Carter took the helmet and held it in front of Anna. "I'm just going to slip this over your head. Okay?"

Anna nodded. Carter bent over her and slipped the helmet over head. It was too big for her and hung loose, blocking part of her vision. "Is it supposed to be so-" Anna stopped as she felt the helmet shrink, adjusting to her head size. It now fit perfect, as if it had been tailor made just for her. "Wow, that was cool!"

"Okay," Byron said. "I'm getting some readings. It's definitely reading two personalities. Unfortunately, this software can't tell which is the dominant." Byron turned and looked from Anna to Carter. "I'll have to extract one and go from there. The good news is that if I get the wrong one, this setup here can reinsert personalities as well. I can just remove the second and reinsert the first, basically. Whenever you're ready."

Anna swallowed and nodded. "I'm ready. Let's do it."

Byron turned back to the computer and began typing, his fingers tapping on the table top. "Because of how this thing works, it's going to put you to sleep while it does the extraction. I guess you'll either wake up here or at home."

Anna smiled at the thought of being back home. It wasn't too bad here, and she'd already made a few friends, but she really wanted the familiarity of home. That, and the fact that there was something in her that kept telling her that she, and the others, weren't supposed to be here and needed to be returned home. She didn't have an idea if bad things would happen if they remained, but she also didn't intend to find out.

Carter smiled his charming smile at her. "Hey. If it is you that wakes up, remember, we'll be here. And then we can get it right." Anna just smiled back at him.

"Okay," Byron said, "here we go."

Byron tapped some more on the desktop. A second later Anna felt a jolt shoot through her, much like the jolt she felt when arriving, then she was asleep.

#

Carter walked to the computer and looked over Byron's shoulder. "Do you really have two signatures?"

Byron nodded. "I do. And I'm seeing distinct differences. Not sure if it's because she's from the real world, or just a different personality. I'd need to examine someone else. Like you, for example."

"If this goes well, you'll get your chance. I don't want to be taken out, mind you. I quite like it here. Despite the calling to go home. How long will this take?"

Byron shrugged. "If all goes well, maybe ten minutes for the extraction. Then we just wait for her to wake up." Byron turned to face Carter. "Just out of curiosity, why didn't you tell her about

being from the real world?"

"Because I don't want her to know. The less she knows about us, the better. Who knows what she'll remember if she gets back to the real world. I don't need her fucking things up by knowing too much. Which is why, when we do find out which personality is which, just erase both." Carter yawned and left the room.

#

A block away, Kara stopped the Mongoose. This was probably too close as it was. In a dead city such as this, it wouldn't be hard to hear its engine from a block away. She had approached from a side street, using the buildings as cover, but there was no guarantee. The only way to find out was to walk the rest of the way and hope they had not been heard.

Kara climbed off after Jacob and joined him at the corner of the building. From their vantage point they could see the entrance to the InTech building. Looking over Jacob's shoulder, it looked to Kara as if the door to the building was closed.

Jacob began walking down the sidewalk on their side of the street. Kara followed close behind. As they drew closer, almost directly across the street, Kara could see light framing the opaque doors. The only sign that something was going on inside. With a glance back at Kara, Jacob crossed the street. Kara followed.

Jacob carefully pulled at the door, opening it just a crack, peeking inside. Then he opened it all the way and went inside. As he did so, the light temporarily blinded Kara. After her eyes adjusted, she went inside as well.

The lobby was a lot nicer than she had thought it would be. Being a high security facility she had thought it would have more of a security appearance. Instead it looked as if they had walked into a hotel lobby. They didn't have long to look, however. Not ten seconds after Kara had stepped into the lobby Jacob and she heard voices. With no time to think, Jacob darted right, behind a pillar. Kara leaped over the desk to her left, trying to make as little noise as she could when landing.

The footsteps stopped not far from the desk where Kara hid. From the sound of their footsteps, she guessed there were probably two men. Cautiously she inched her head partially around the end of the desk, attempting to get a look at them.

There were two men, one almost a head taller than the other, facing each other. The tall one had his back to Kara, obstructing any view the shorter would have had of her.

"I'm going to contact him," the shorter man said, "and let him know we've found it and a way to test it. In the mean time, make this place secure. I don't want any other uninvited guests joining us here. It's worrisome enough that she's here."

The taller man nodded. Kara ducked back as the two men separated. She could hear one set move toward the doors, which opened and closed. The second set, however, came her way.

Kara moved up under the desk, crawling as far back as she could, hoping the slight darkness would give her a moment's surprise, if necessary. Her hand reached for her sidearm, ready to draw if she was spotted.

The tall man walked around the desk and to a computer terminal Kara had seen active as she had jumped over the counter. After a few seconds of tapping Kara heard various doors and locks beep and click as they became active.

The tall man, apparently finished with his job of securing the building, walked back around the counter. Slowly, as quietly as she could, Kara crept to the edge of the counter and peered around again. From her vantage she saw the tall man walk down a hall. At the end of the hall was a stairwell, into which the tall man entered.

Kara stood up and looked around. She could no longer see Jacob and was beginning to wonder where he went when there was a chirp over her intercom. Activating it she heard Jacob.

"I've found Yuki," he said. "I don't know exactly what they've done, but she's out cold."

"Where are you?" she asked.

"I'm several levels down, in the basement. It looks like this is where they create the smart A.I. I managed to slip down when both men briefly had their backs to me."

Kara wondered how Jacob had managed this. She'd only known him a few months, but he never seemed the fleet footed type. Never the less, she pushed it aside and warned him about the tall man she had seen going into the stairwell. Then she walked to the front doors, hoping to hear part of the shorter man's conversation.

"-nothing to worry about. Brian was able to get two patterns. We pulled one out to see which was which. And after we do, I intend to have him run it on me, to see if it's accurate." The man paused. Kara couldn't hear what the person on the other side was saying, but he nodded from time to time.

From the sounds of it they were using the A.I. machine to extract Yuki's personality. Which, if Kara remembered correctly, would kill her. However, she didn't understand what he meant when he said this man Brian had found two patterns.

"As I said, she's nothing to worry about. When we do determine which personality is which, we're going to just erase both and dump her body somewhere. As for any friends of hers that may come looking for her, we've secured the building. They won't be getting in easy, if they find it at all. And we've already made plans in case they do find us and manage to get back to their ship."

Kara leaned back from the doors, taking in what she had just heard. It seemed as if the men Yuki had met intended to use her to test the A.I. device then kill her! She had to warn Jacob, tell him to grab Yuki and get her out of there. Once on the street they could use the enemy's transport to drive Yuki back to the warehouse and lift off.

Kara turned around, about to run for the stairwell. Her breath caught in her throat when she realized that someone was standing right there. She had time to look up into the face of the tall man before there was a flash of movement and something collided with her jaw. She crumpled into the arms of the man, her senses going fuzzy before she passed into unconsciousness.

#

Anna awoke to voices. They were unclear, muted from the fog of sleep which still shrouded her. The dream from last night was coming back to her. Being pulled into Halo. Being disconnected. Feeling the need to get reconnected.

Xbox Live! That was it. She was hearing chatter over Xbox Live. She had fallen asleep again playing Halo. Just like a hundred time before. People chasing her and trying to commit her for being insane were fading back into the fog, and disappearing with it. She was already feeling half a millennium younger!

The voices were becoming clearer, her brain beginning to focus on them. Apparently she had been asleep only a few minutes, as she hadn't been disconnected.

Disconnected! How different that word felt now after that nightmare! Anna leaned back in her chair and stretched, yawning quietly. Something didn't feel right. The chair she was in wasn't the chair she had at home. It felt like a cold metal chair. And something was pinning her hair to her head, as if she were wearing a helmet.

Anna opened her eyes and looked around. The transfer hadn't worked apparently. She was still in the chair and still wearing the helmet. Her heart sank for a few seconds at the thought of not being home. But that thought faded as she remembered what they had said about just redoing the transfer, sending her home and putting Yuki back in her body.

To her right one man leaned over another sitting at a computer. She must have passed out for only a few seconds and it was their voices she was hearing. Carter hadn't even had a chance to move. She started to say something, but stopped when she noticed it wasn't Carter standing next to Brian. She blinked a couple of times, clearing the visual cobwebs, before she realized it was Jacob.

Anna reached up to take the helmet off. She was getting a headache. Maybe from the tightness of the helmet, maybe from not eating for a few hours. "What are you doing here?" she asked Jacob. The helmet loosened its grip on her head and came off in her hands.

Jacob whirled to look at her, a hopeful look on his face. Anna noticed he had his sidearm in his hand. "Yuki?"  
>Anna shook her head. "No. Still Anna."<p>

"How do you feel?" Brian asked.

"Better, actually. A little tired, but better. I no longer have that dire urge to get reconnected."

Brian nodded. "Whenever you're ready to try again, let me know."

Anna nodded. She stood up from the chair and stretched again as Jacob walked over to her. "I'm sorry. Brian was showing me the dual patterns the computer picked up."

Anna shook her head. "Don't worry about it. If one of my friends had come to me and started spouting about being another person, I'd probably think they were insane as well." She gestured to the sidearm still in Jacob's hand. "What's that for?"

Jacob looked down, having forgotten he was still holding the pistol, and holstered it. "Oh, just in case. When I sneaked down here and saw you unconscious, I wasn't sure what had happened. I didn't want to take any chances."

The door opened and Westlake entered, carrying Kara. "What happened?" Jacob asked.

Westlake carefully lay the unconscious girl on the floor. "I'm afraid I startled her. When I did, I caused her to fall face first into a low wall."

Anna rubbed her temples. The room was feeling stuffy and was now starting to feel crowded with all these people here. And her headache was just getting worse. "I need to go outside," she said. "I need some fresh air."

"Are you all right?" Jacob asked.

Anna nodded. "I'll be fine. I just have to get some fresh air."

"I'll come with you."

"Thanks, but you don't need to. You look you're interested in this, anyway," Anna pointed to Brian and the computer.

"Go ahead," Brian said. "There's not much more I can show you at this time, anyway." Anna looked from Brian to Jacob, who motioned for her to go.

#

Everything was set. After they disposed of the woman and ran a few more tests, they could start bringing in their own people. Carter descended the stairs, feeling good about the situation.

At the bottom of the stairs, not far from the scanning room, he could hear voices. One was Brian's and one was Anna's. But the third wasn't Westlake's. Cautiously he crept up to the door, which had been left open just a crack. The relative darkness of the hall outside the well lit room allowed him to see in without being seen.

He could see Brian sitting at the computer. He saw Westlake's left half, his right half being blocked by the door. Anna was standing up, holding the scanning helmet in her hands. And there was someone else. He realized it must be this Jacob person Anna had told him about. And if Jacob was here, Kara couldn't have been too far behind.

Carter pushed the door open. Jacob stiffened and lowered his hand,

which had been pointed at the door. Anna turned and looked at him, a little startled herself. Westlake and Brian just glanced at him.

Anna turned and tossed the helmet onto the seat. "Rick, this is Jacob, the doctor I was telling you about." Carter shook Jacob's hand with a nod. "And that is Kara." Anna pointed to the floor on the other side of Westlake where an unconscious woman lay.

"I guess you have everything sorted out, then?" Carter said.

Anna nodded. "Yes. Brian explained to Jacob about the personalities and all that. And if you'll excuse us, Jacob is going to accompany me as I go outside and get some fresh air."

Carter stepped out of the way and let Anna and Jacob pass. After they left he shut the door, looking Westlake to Brian. "Okay, what the fuck?"

"Sorry," Brian said, "Jacob put a gun to the back of my head."

"And what did you tell him?"

"Only what we told Anna. That we were trying to help her get back to the real world. I showed him the two patterns and he believed me."

Carter turned to the woman on the floor. "And her?"

"She knows too much," Westlake said. "She overheard you talking to The Voice."

"So she knows about our plans to sabotage their ship when they try to take off."

Westlake nodded. "Highly likely."

Carter took the helmet from the seat, sitting down and placing the helmet in his lap. "Give me a minute. I need to think."

#

Anna looked up at the night sky. It was not unlike her night sky. All the constellations she knew were there. Stars of varying intensity. It all seemed to be here. It occurred to her again how this was more than just a person using office software to write a story on a computer somewhere.

She looked at Jacob and guessed he was thinking the opposite thing. In his position she'd be thinking it too. Wondering if you were just someone's character. A pawn in their story. Or worse, incidental.

Anna walked over and put her arm around Jacob. "Stop thinking about it."

Jacob looked at her as if she had been reading his mind, this time. "Kinda hard not to. I've spent my entire life becoming and being a doctor, to help people, and I find I'm not even real. That none of us are. That's a hell of a mind fuck."



"Imagine it from my point of view," Anna said. "I'm sucked into this universe, five hundred years removed from what I know of as home, what you call the past, and with maybe no way home. That's a mind fuck." Anna poked Jacob in the side. "Besides, you're plenty real. Don't protest! Where I come from, remember, this is supposed to be a game. With limited characters in limited environments. And this entire area," Anna swept her arm at the buildings around her, "was glassed by the Covenant. And you, Kara, Rick, Brian, and Monty weren't in it. This is just as real as my world, my universe."

They stood holding each other, Anna looking at the sky, Jacob lost in thought, when she said, "You know, I rarely see them at home."

Jacob followed her eyes up to the sky, twinkling with stars. "Pollution?"

Anna shook her head. "No, not for the most part. I just never look anymore. Too busy doing other things, I guess."

Jacob nodded. "I see them all the time. All I have to do is look out a window. But, I never look at them myself, either."

Anna began to feel a little sorry for herself. Here she was in a universe where people routinely went into space, and she was probably never going to get to go. "I've never been there," she said, more to herself than Jacob.

"In space?" he asked. Anna nodded. "How about I take you up?"

Anna looked at him. "Right now?"

"Yes, right now." Jacob gestured at the transport parked not far away. "I can ask them if they can spare a moment to drive you, me, and Kara back to the warehouse. I'll fly you up to our ship and show you around, if you're not in a big hurry to go back home."

Anna jumped up and down, hugging Jacob and kissing him on the cheek. "That would be awesome! I would love that!"

#

"Sure." Carter gestured to Westlake. "Monty here can drive you. We're in no hurry here, so take your time." Anna's face was flushed and she was smiling like a cat in a mouse store.

"No problem," Westlake said. He bent down and picked up Kara, throwing her over his shoulder. She moaned a little, but stayed asleep. "Ready whenever you are."

Carter watched Westlake follow Anna and Jacob out of the room, then closed the door.

"You sure about this?" Brian asked.

Carter nodded. "When they get on their ship, we'll go with that plan you and Monty laid out on the way over here. Think you can do it from here?"

Brian nodded and turned to the computer.

#

Anna smiled as the bay door to the Pelican deployment pod opened, revealing an empty space for the Mongoose ATVs and the troop bay beyond, sometimes referred to as the Blood Tray. Her first space craft! Anna wished she had a camera, for all the good it would do her.

Westlake passed her, carrying the still sleeping Kara, and strapped her into one of the seats. "You're all set," he said to Jacob.

Jacob thanked Westlake then turned to Anna. "Care to sit in the cockpit with me?"

"I'd love to!"

Anna was expecting a jumble of buttons, switches, knobs, levers, dials, and a host of other things, but the cockpit of the Pelican was quit simple with just two seats, a center console, and display screens in front of each seat. Each seat had a flight stick on either side of. The console was mostly display gauges, with a few switches and buttons. "Wow,"

"Wow what?"

"I was expecting more switches, buttons, and things. I really need to start remembering things in the future are a lot more advanced," Anna said, climbing into the copilot seat.

Jacob laughed and climbed into the pilot's seat.

Anna turned to look at Kara in the back, sleeping with her head on her chest. "Is she all right? She's been out awhile."

Jacob nodded. "Glass jaw. I saw her walk into a door frame once and almost knock herself out. It took her a minute to get on her feet."

Anna laughed. She'd walked into plenty of door frames in her time. Doors, walls, and other things, as well. Never, though, had she almost knocked her self out.

Jacob pushed a button and the bay door began to close. Another button and the engines quickly whined to life. And before the bay door was even fully close, he pulled back on one of his sticks and the Pelican began to lift into the air. A twist here and a push there and they were flying toward the ocean before banking and lifting.

"Stop!" Anna looked back to see Kara awake, undoing her straps. The slight jarring must have awakened her. "They've done something to the ship!" Kara had unbuckled herself and bolted into the cockpit, leaning between the seats.

"What do you mean?" Jacob asked.

"I overheard the short guy talking to someone. He was planning to kill you," Kara pointed to Anna. "And he said he had made plans in case we had discovered him and his friend and were able to make it back to the ship."

"Hang on." Jacob manipulated his sticks, turning the Pelican back toward the city. As he did so, there was a jolt and alarms started going off.

Suddenly the Pelican pitched forward, flying straight down. Kara fell forward, landing on the glass and obstructing Jacob's and Anna's view of the approaching water. Because it was night she couldn't have seen it even if Kara hadn't blocked their view, but she knew they were still over it just the same.

Anna glanced at the console and saw numbers changing rapidly, some going up, some going down, some doing both. She was trying to find the altitude when everything went dark. The engines whined down and they went into a free fall.

The Pelican flopped around. One moment she could see stars around Kara's body which was on top of her, and next dark earth, with Kara's body blocking most of the view. Anna reached up several times, trying to grab Kara, who was being thrown around the cockpit like a ball, only to grab air each time.

There was a bone jarring impact and Anna knew they had hit something. Maybe the ground. Maybe a building. She didn't know. She was thrown back in her seat, her head smacking the headrest, almost knocking her out. Kara was thrown back into the troop bay and the Pelican rolled and pinwheeled across hard surface, bits and pieces being torn off.

### 3. Sorrow Of Souls

**\*\*Chapter 3**  
**><strong>\*\*Sorrow Of Souls\*\***

Anna groaned and shifted in her chair. Everything hurt, like a herd of rabid cattle stomped all over her. She pressed the release on the harness and fell. The Pelican rested on it's roof. She looked up and saw Jacob unconscious, his arms hanging toward her. Then she remembered Kara, who had not been strapped down.

Looking into the back Anna saw Kara had gotten tangled in netting tied to the side of the cargo pod. Right side up the netting was at floor level, but now Kara hung limp. Through her suit, Anna couldn't tell how much of a beating Kara had taken.

"Jacob." Anna's voice was rough. Her chest and neck hurt, along with the rest of her body. "Jacob." Her second attempt was a little better.

Anna stood up. It was slow and laborious, feeling every joint and muscle ache. If this is what she felt like, she thought, she could only imagine what Kara would feel like if she were awake. She reached out and grabbed one of Jacob's arms, shaking him.

Jacob groaned. Through his helmet Anna saw him shake his head weakly, clearing it.

"Jacob," she said, "I'm going to get you down. Can you hold on to me?"

Where she stood, Jacob's head was even with her stomach. Weakly he wrapped his arms around her waist. She reached down with one arm and grabbed the front of his suit, lifting him as best as she could. She pushed the release on his harness and braced herself for the bulk of his weight. Carefully she lowered him to the floor.

"Are you okay?"

Jacob nodded. "I think so. I just hurt everywhere. What about you?"

"I'm fine, I think. I'm not so sure about Kara, however."

Jacob sat up, with some help from Anna, and looked to the back of the Pelican, where Kara hung. Anna helped him up, and together they walked over to Kara. Her faceplate was cracked and smeared with blood.

Jacob removed a device from his belt the size of an iPhone and held it toward Kara. Looking over Jacob's shoulder, Anna saw a miniature holographic Kara outlined. Numbers and graphics overlaid various parts of Kara's body.

Jacob reattached the device to his belt. "Well, she's alive. But just barely. It looks like she took a hell of a beating. Let's get her down, but be careful."

Anna wrapped her arms around Kara's waist, holding her steady while Jacob climbed into the netting and disentangled Kara. Slowly Anna lowered Kara to the floor. Jacob knelt beside her and removed her helmet. Kara's face was completely red with blood, some of her hair mottled down to the sides of her head. A gash on Kara's forehead, a broken nose, and a couple of missing teeth accounted for all the blood, Anna guessed.

"You're have to go for help." Jacob said. "I can stabilize her only so much and keep an eye on her while you're gone."

"What about calling for help?"

Jacob shook his head. "Our suit coms are short range. They need repeaters or a booster from a ship for long distance communications and there are none out here."

"I can't go back to the city. If Rick and his men suspect we're still alive, they'll know for sure then." Anna thought that maybe she could sneak into the city without being detected, but she didn't want to take any chances, considering what Carter had already done.

"You won't need to. From where we are there's an abandoned base just a few clicks away. It's geothermal powered and if you can get there you can use the repeater there to call our ship, the Sorrow of Souls."

Anna nodded. She guessed she could run and walk the distance. What she wasn't sure about was how to contact the ship. "How do I do that? Kara only taught me a little bit about the coms."

"Did she teach you about frequencies and encryption?"

"A little."

"You shouldn't need to worry about it. Your suit has the Sorrow's contact information built in, being a member of her crew. But, if you do need it, open an all frequency transmission and just ask for me. I'll keep an ear out."

Anna nodded and walked with Jacob out of the cargo pod. The door had been flung off in the crash. The only thing that had kept Kara from being lost was she had gotten tangled in the netting.

"From here, travel east to the ocean. Use the compass overlay in your suit. Then follow the coastline north. The base shouldn't be more than a couple of kilometers from here." Jacob smiled. "It's where I was trying to land us."

Anna waited to see if Jacob had anything else to say. When he didn't, she said good bye and started toward the coast. Yuki's body was in excellent physical shape. Even better than her real body, from what she could tell. That was saying a lot considering that Anna had been a long distance runner in high school and still kept in shape.

A quarter moon was making its ascent and, on the dark land around her, provided enough light to see. Just under twenty minutes later, according to her suit's clock, she was running up the coast when something on the horizon caught her eye. She was seeing tiny shapes which could be small buildings or large vehicles.

As she got closer, she didn't see any lights or movement, but slowed her pace to a walk. It looked to Anna like a couple of ships had landed. She hadn't seen any fly over on her run, but it wasn't beyond reason that if she was looking for the abandoned base that Carter and his men might also be looking for it on the assumption she, Jacob, and Kara had tried to make it there. If that were the case, they had flown there while Jacob's Pelican had crashed.

Even closer, Anna began to think that the ships were abandoned. There were still no lights, no signs of people, and no activity of any kind she could make out. Cautiously she made her way through tall grass and small shrubs to the nearest ship.

It was a Pelican, much like the one Jacob had flown, but without the extended cargo pod. The bay door was open and dirt had blown inside over time, how ever long it had sat here. If there were ships here, then the base couldn't be too far away.

Walking around the first Pelican Anna saw that the second ship was also a Pelican. It, too, had been left to the weather for some reason. Whatever that was, if one of them ran she didn't need to call for help. She had seen Jacob fly one and thought she had learned enough from that to figure out the rest. She would simply fly back and get Jacob and Kara.

Anna climbed into the pilot's seat and looked at the console. Nothing was lit and she couldn't read any of the writing. After a few seconds of trying to remember exactly which button Jacob had pressed first, Anna pressed the one she thought would be right.

All the lights inside came on and a message flashed on her visor

telling her the Pelican's system was linking with her suit and a new menu item called 'D77-TC' appeared. Navigating the menu and submenus, Anna found she could access most of, if not all of, the ship's systems. In less than two minutes she had closed the rear door and started the engines, happy to hear the now familiar whine.

Carefully manipulating the sticks in each hand, Anna got a feel for the ship and slowly took off, wheeling around in the direction she thought Jacob was.

#

Kara had begun to slip in and out of consciousness a few minutes after Anna left. Jacob had brought a bag of medicine he thought might be needed in Anna's case, which included painkillers and sedatives, but that was lost in the debris field behind and around the upside down Pelican.

A click on Jacob's coms told him he was being contacted. On his visor the COMS menu flashed. Bringing it up he saw the name ORIMOTO.

"Anna?"

"Aye, that's me."

"I guess you found the base just fine. Did you contact the Sorrow?"

"No," Anna said. "No need to. I found something better than the repeater."

Better than the repeater? "What?"

"Go outside and look toward the base."

Jacob walked outside and looked. From the direction of the base he could see lights. It looked like they were in the air, but they were close to the ground and still far away. Whatever it was moved slowly. "Is that you?"

"It is. I found two more Pelicans on the rim of the base. They've been abandoned for a while. I doubt if anyone will mind if we borrow one."

Jacob smiled. Anna had found another ship they could use. And furthermore, she was piloting it. If the ship was space worthy then they could use it to get to the Sorrow. If not, then it still had a transmitter capable of contacting them. "Adjust your course a little right."

In the distance Jacob saw the ship change course, almost directly for him. He spent the next couple of minutes guiding Anna to his location. Her landing was a little hairy, but he was never so glad to see anyone as when the troop bay door opened.

"Good work," he said. "Now let's get Kara transferred over."

Using the netting and several broken seats, Anna and Jacob fashioned a stretcher and carried Kara to the working Pelican.

#

Being the more experienced pilot, they agreed that Jacob should fly now. Anna's flight back had been slow and the landing not so good. She was glad to have even made it without crashing. Now, though, they were lifting off again. Hopefully with not another sabotaged ship.

As they gained altitude the atmosphere thinned, thousands, maybe millions, of stars not seen through the atmosphere of Earth became visible. The moon gained a clarity she had seen only in movies and pictures.

Every few seconds there were glints from the moon, like reflections from metal. It took her a second to remember that the moon was now populated. That gave her another goal. And now it seemed she was going to be able to fulfill some of those goals since she wasn't going to go home any time soon.

She wondered if Carter had been lying about being able to send her home. She had been brought here, after all. Surely there was a way to go back home. Now, at least, she didn't have the nagging feeling in her head that she needed to get reconnected. The dual personalities in the same body must have caused an unnatural conflict, forcing that instinct.

Anna remembered that Yuki's personality was still stored in the computer, if Carter hadn't had it deleted. She hoped that Yuki's personality was still there, because she hated the thought of what would become of Yuki's body if Yuki's personality were deleted and she were sent home.

She heard Jacob say it would be a few minutes and turned to him. "Tell me about Yuki."

Jacob looked at her, not having any idea why Anna should want to know such a thing. "Why do want to know about Yuki?"

Anna shrugged. "I figure if I'm going to live in her body, I will probably have to live her life. I need to know all I can about her to do that."

Jacob took a breath. "Well, Yuki and I grew up together. We enlisted in the UNSC on the same day. She was always interested in space travel, and I was interested in being a doctor. Currently Yuki works as a maintenance accessory, doing odd jobs around the ship, fixing things that need fixing. She's always been good with her hands, fixing things. As for friends, Yuki was kind of a recluse. She knows people, but rarely socializes."

Anna wasn't so different from Yuki. The only socializing she did was on Xbox Live. Other than that, she exercised and did what ever came to mind for a hobby. Usually Halo.

Jacob pointed through the Pelican's window. At first Anna saw only the stars ahead. Then she noticed it. The Pelican traveled toward a growing point of light, shifting against the backdrop of the universe. The Sorrow of Souls!

It seemed a tiny speck in the vastness of open space, but as they got closer Anna began to get a grasp on the proportions. From a distance,

tiny specks flitting around the ship grew larger as they got closer and Anna realized some of those specks were larger than the Pelican she was in.

"Jesus. How big is it?" she asked Jacob.

"About two and a half kilometers long. Current compliment of about eight thousand."

"Eight thousand!" Eight thousand was more people than lived in her square mile back home. Not that she lived in a very populated area, but to think of a space ship large enough to carry eight thousand people was something from science fiction stories. As if being pulled into a video game whose time line was five hundred years in the future was any less impressive.

The docking bay of the Sorrow was no less impressive than the ship herself. Dozens of ships of various types lined the multilevel bay, parked in their own designated hangars. Dozens of people walked to and from ships. Some leaving, some coming back, and some just stocking supplies.

Jacob weaved his way around walkways and people to the back of the bay, where a small medical staff waited at a temporary dock. Once Jacob opened the Pelican's bay doors they rushed in and transferred Kara to a proper stretcher, carrying her away.

"Aren't you going to go with them?" Anna asked. She had thought Jacob would want to see Kara to the infirmary.

"No," he shook his head. "They can handle it just fine. I thought I would show you to your rooms, though. You can get a shower and a change of clothes. Then maybe we'll get something to eat."

Anna felt her stomach rumble at the thought of food. She hadn't even thought about it, but she had been here hours with nothing to eat. "After you."

Anna followed Jacob, daydreaming of a hot shower and a change of clothes, washing the dirt and sweat off.

#

Anna pressed her hand to the recognition panel next to the door, and in response the it slid open with a barely audible click. Yuki's quarters were like a small apartment. Directly ahead was a small kitchen with what appeared to be a refrigerator, a sink, and something that could be a microwave or other type of food warmer. Next to the refrigerator was what appeared to be a metallic wardrobe.

To the right were two doors in the wall. Opening each, Anna found one was a bathroom and shower, and the other was a walk in closet. About half the clothes inside appeared military in nature to Anna, and the rest appeared to be casual civilian clothes. There was no lacy lingerie or anything else that suggested to Anna an active personal or sex life.

Yuki's bed sat against the wall to the bathroom. She had put her mattress on crates, elevating the bed enough to be able to sit on the



edge of it.

Anna didn't know what they did for radio or television in the future, but there appeared to be neither here. She would have to ask Jacob later, at the moment it didn't matter. All she wanted was a shower.

Anna turned to Jacob, who had followed her in. "Okay, just a couple of questions. First, how do get out of this suit?"

Jacob gripped his midsection, crossing his arms with one hand on his pants and the other gripping the top just above the belt. He uncrossed his arms, twisting his suit and unfastening it with a click. He let his bottom drop, revealing pants beneath, then pulled his top over his head, showing his shirt. The tee shirt had been soaked in sweat and was discolored around the collar.

Anna unfastened her suit and removed it, revealing her own pants and tee shirt, also discolored. "Which brings me to my next question. What do I do with my dirty clothes?"

Jacob walked to what Anna had thought was a wardrobe and opened it. Inside it looked still like a wardrobe, with a bar and hangars. "This is a cleaner. Just hang your clothes here for a few minutes, while you take a shower for example, and it cleans them. By the time you get out they should be clean."

"Is there a button to start it, or something?"

Jacob shook his head. "No. Just put them in here and it will detect it. And it works for anything. Your suit, bed sheets, dishes."

"Dishes?" It seemed odd to Anna to do her dishes and laundry in the same device. She had to keep reminding herself this was five centuries in the future. Jacob just nodded.

There was a moment of awkward silence while Anna tried to think of an excuse to run Jacob off so she could go take a shower. He seemed to read her thoughts. "I'll just grab my gear and go, and left you take a shower."

Anna smiled and thanked him as Jacob put his suit back on and locked the halves together again. With a wave he turned and left, the door sliding shut behind him with another barely audible click.

The cleaner was split into two parts, upper and lower. The lower was several rows of drawers, where she guessed she could put small items, like dishes. In the upper half Anna placed her suit, then stripped and hung her clothes, closing the doors.

A full length mirror hung inside the bathroom. Whether Yuki had hung it there or it came standard, Anna didn't know. She stood looking at Yuki's body in the mirror. It was the first time she had gotten to see the body she was in from another angle than down. Yuki's body was incredibly toned and muscular. Anna had known Yuki was very fit, from running several kilometers without even getting winded.

Yuki's body also had scars. Some of them looked like deep cuts that had healed. Others looked like old bullet wounds. The scars were not

so bad as to mar Yuki's appearance, however. Anna certainly wouldn't have been embarrassed by them. Maybe Yuki had a different attitude.

It didn't take Anna long to work the shower controls. It even used real running water! They were simply digital controls that let her adjust the water pressure and temperature. In a few seconds she was running steaming hot water down her back, relaxing her. For the first time since they had arrived she didn't feel hungry. She now felt tired. She'd been here over half a day and had no idea when the last time Yuki had slept, or even rested.

Anna dried herself off and tossed the towel into the cleaner. She checked her clothes and found they were still a little damp, but clean.

Anna yawned and sat on the edge of the bed. The tiredness was really hitting her. Mentally and physically she was tired. She lay back on the bed, feeling the warmth of the sheets. It was like the bed called to her, beckoning her to sleep. She would just close her eyes and rest, and keep an ear out for Jacob. Surely he would knock or ring a bell and not just walk in on her, laying stark naked on her bed.

#

Anna yawned and woke up. How long had she slept, she wondered. And why was she sitting up? That's not how she went to sleep. The feeling was familiar, as if she were in a place she knew.

Anna opened her eyes and looked around. She was back in her home. The familiar large television showing her disconnected Halo. She looked around at her things. Her bookshelf, her computer, the sofa. She stood up and even looked at her favorite gaming chair. After that nightmare she just had she was seeing things anew.

But she was back. Back home to twenty first century technology. In a way she was glad it had been a dream. This is what she knew, how she lived day to day. But she also missed some of that Haloverse technology. A cleaning wardrobe is something she definitely could use. And a trip into space is something she had always wanted to take.

Waking up more she realized it was late morning. And her bladder told her that if she stood around looking too long she would be wishing she could put her carpet in a cleaner.

A couple of minutes later Anna sat down at her computer with a quick breakfast. She logged on to her Facebook, Twitter, and email, checking to see what not so exciting news had happened in the half a day she had slept. There was nothing in her email. Several girlfriends had posted a message on her Facebook wanting to know if she wanted to go for a drink later and maybe meet some hot guys. They were always trying to get her to be more social.

Anna smiled, thinking about the odd coincidence that she had slept the exact length of time she had dreamed she was in Haloverse. It seemed odd to her that the dream stuck with her. It had seemed so vivid, so realistic. Her dreams were usually dreams she woke up from knowing the things in them could never happen. This one was

different.

Rick Carter had said there were others like her, that had been pulled into the Halo world. If that were true, then a quick Google search might turn up people that had gone brain dead while playing Halo. Especially ones that had been there months.

Satisfying her curiosity, Anna did a quick search for 'Halo person found not responsive' turned up nothing. Trying 'Halo disconnected' turned up exactly what she thought. Tons of people who had no idea how to configure their routers.

She tried 'disconnected from Xbox Live while playing Halo returned home'. A quick glance of the first page results revealed more of the same router issues. But one link stood out. It read 'DISCONNECTED: The story of my time in the world of Halo'.

Anna spent a minute reading it. With every passing sentence she felt like her dream, which still hadn't faded, was more real then she had wanted to admit. The author of the story described the exact symptoms she had experienced. The electrical sensation, the feeling of being disconnected, the need to get reconnected. It was a good thing she had finished her breakfast. She suddenly wasn't so hungry.

As fast as her fingers could type, Anna shot an email to the author of the story, giving him or her a quick rundown of the things that had happened to her. She sat back, satisfied she had worked that out of her system. She was anxious for a reply, but knew that even on a Saturday, it would probably be a while.

She resigned herself to impatiently waiting and looked around for something to keep her interest. She didn't have anything to do online, but there had been several games she had wanted to play on her Xbox. After dreaming of Halo for half a day, she was ready to quit for a while.

Anna picked up the controller and began to shut down Halo. As she did an electric sensation started in her hand and traveled up her arm, spreading through the rest of her body. As it reached her head, Anna closed her eyes and grimaced as what felt like a massive migraine hit her.

#

"Anna?"

Anna could hear Jacob's voice. It sounded as if he were standing just a few feet away. She was laying on something soft and could feel cool air on her naked body. She knew she was back in the other reality again. Back in Yuki's body. Had that been a dream, going back home? It hadn't felt like it. Just like being here hadn't felt like a dream when she was there.

Anna opened her eyes and saw Jacob standing just inside her room. The door was closed behind him and he was looking away, at the far wall, an oblivious look in his eyes.

Anna quickly covered herself and turned away from Jacob. "Jesus Christ, don't you knock or ring or something?"

Jacob smiled. "Oh, sorry if I startled you. This is just a hologram. I'm still outside the room and can't see what's going on inside."

Anna rolled back over and looked at Jacob. Now that her eyes were focused, it did look like Jacob was a bit transparent. "I was just wondering if you still wanted to go get something to eat."

Anna felt her stomach rumble and remembered eating in the real world. Apparently that didn't carry over to here. If it had been real. She sat up and looked around, remembering her clothes were still in the cleaner. "Uh, yeah. Give me a second to finish and I'll be ready." The hologram of Jacob nodded, reached forward, and disappeared.

Anna sat on the edge of her bed and rubbed her eyes. Maybe they were both real. Maybe she had somehow been transported back to her reality when she went to sleep here. If that were the case, though, why hadn't she gone back when Yuki's personality was removed from her?

Putting it aside for the moment, Anna stood up and stretched, feeling her body ache. After she ate, she would have to come back and sleep. In this reality, at least, she still needed sleep. A few minutes rest wasn't enough even for a soldier of the future. She walked into the small closet and chose a new set of clothes.

In this reality, she thought. That was how she was beginning to see it, as a reality. Maybe it had something to do with the subatomic eleven dimensional theory she had seen on PBS some time back.

Her stomach growled again as she slipped her shoes on, now fully dressed.

#

Anna could see Jacob watching her scarf down her food. She knew she was eating like it was her last meal, but she didn't care. Her stomach pains kept telling her she needed more food. After three meals she finally sat back and sighed.

She had expected the food to be only okay, but it had turned out to be great. Being a military ship she had pictured something simple with limited choices, especially being in space and feeding eight thousand people. Even before they got there, though, she had reminded herself again that she was in the future and couldn't be certain of what to expect.

The cafeteria was closer to a large buffet than a kitchen. It was like walking into a Golden Coral or a similar buffet. Anna had grabbed one of everything that had appealed to her, and had gone back for more twice.

Now Jacob watched her as she held her stomach and breathed. "Yuki ever eat this much?" Anna asked when she was sure she could talk without throwing up.

Jacob nodded. "I've seen her eat more. Not many times, but I have."

Anna yawned and held her stomach. "I think I'm ready to go back to my

quarters and sleep." Jacob took something from his pocket and passed it across the table to her. It was a small square device about the size of her palm. "What's this?"

"A way-finder," Jacob said. "Just tell it where you want to go and it will show you the way. They're given to new personnel aboard a ship. I don't know if Yuki still has hers, so I just stopped by stores on the way to pick you up and grabbed one."

Anna turned the device over several times in her hand. There appeared to be no buttons. She tapped the screen and the device blinked to life. "Where would you like to go?" Panning the device around like a camera, Anna saw the cafeteria overlaid with information about the various exits and areas.

As far as she was concerned, Anna just wanted to get back to her room. "My quarters," she said.

An arrow appeared on the side of her device, prompting Anna to turn that way. "Your quarters are this way," the device's voice announced in a cheery voice. Anna swung the device to the direction the arrow was pointing and saw a green line overlaid on the floor leading to the cafeteria exit.

Anna looked at Jacob. "So, I just follow the line?"

"Just follow the line," Jacob said. "And if you need to find me, or anyone, just ask and it will take you to me. If I happen to be traveling throughout the ship it will recalculate. And if you keep it with you I can use it to contact you."

Jacob stood up. "When I get off duty, and you get up, maybe I'll stop by and show you a few things. I imagine you have a lot of questions, but they can wait."

Anna nodded and stood up. "Yes, I think they can wait. I think I could sleep all weekend. Speaking of which, when am I supposed to go back on duty?"

"Not for a while," Jacob said. "I cleared it with your watch commander to give you a week off. I doubt we'll have this whole personality business sorted out by then, but at least it'll give you a chance to get somewhat adjusted to life here."

"I hope so." Anna hoped they would have it sorted out by then. She had no idea even where to start living Yuki's life. Sometime during the week she would have to learn to fly and go back to the Earth. She needed to get Yuki's personality back and restore it. Assuming Carter hadn't done something to it.

"I'm on my way to check on Kara," Jacob said. "I'll see you in a few hours."

"Okay. See you in a few hours." Jacob walked away toward an exit on the far side of the cafeteria. Anna started following the imaginary line on the floor.

#

The dawn light glinted off the twisted wreckage of the Pelican that

had crashed the night before. Rick Carter surveyed the wreckage, noting with a deal of dissatisfaction the absence of bodies, and the imprint of what looked like landing gear not too far away. It had taken Carter and Westlake all night to locate the wreckage. The quickest way to crash the vessel going into orbit had been to disable a few key system. One of the systems affected had been the location transponder.

Westlake, who had been at the take-off site had only witnessed which way they had started to fall before the buildings of the city had blocked his view. This, at least, gave them some kind of direction to go on.

Carter had expected the possibility of one survivor. Maybe two. And barely alive. However, it appeared that all three had survived. At least two of them knew their names and all three knew their location. They either had to be found, or a new location to conduct their experiments had to be found.

Westlake returned from the crashed ship. As if reading Carter's mind, he said, "Don't worry about them."

"Don't worry? What's to worry about? Three people who know our fucking location here and our names. I won't worry about them. I won't worry that they probably know we want to kill them." Carter couldn't believe Westlake was acting like everything was okay. If any of the three told anyone what they knew, it could mean the exposure of the entire operation. And that would mean a pissed off Voice. Carter didn't enjoy the thought of pissing off someone who was as close to God in this place as one could get.

Carter was certain The Voice was a person, he just wasn't sure about anything else. The Voice claimed that he had brought Carter and the others into this universe. And he had a peculiar ability to contact Carter wherever he was. Even by the laws in this universe communications were limited in speed and distance. The Voice seemed to have found a way around that.

"Good," Westlake said and smiled. "My people will be on it shortly. We know who they are, as well. And I know where they went."

Carter stared at Westlake. Sometimes the man surprised him with a flash of brilliance. How he had figured out where they went was of little importance. "Where are they?"

"On a ship called the Sorrow of Souls. It's a modified colony ship, now a scientific vessel, geared more toward exploration than military action. A crew of eight thousand, I have a few people on board who can help."

Carter smiled and looked at the sunrise. If things turned out right it would be a bright day indeed.

#### 4. Talon

**\*\*Chapter 4\*\***

**><strong>Talon<strong>**

As the pain in his head subsided Xander Harvard leaned forward and

wretched, gripping the arms of his chair. They were cold steel beneath his hands, not the soft pads of his living room computer chair. His arms and legs felt as if they were tied down. The air was also different, colder. It smelled of something sweet, pungent.

It sounded like he was in a large space, like a warehouse or hangar. There was a constant hum that sounded to him like air flowing from vents. He could feel a slight current of air. There was another sound to his left, different from the ambient noises he was hearing. It sounded like someone walking on a hard surface; concrete, maybe.

Xander opened his eyes and looked around. A bright light was shining directly on his face, obscuring his view of his surroundings. He could make out four or five figures standing next to the light source, too dark to see. Another figure paced to his left, just at the edge of the light, his face a profile against the slightly less dark background of a wall. Looking farther to the side all he could see was blackness. It was impossible to tell how big the room was.

More importantly, where was he? The last thing he remembered was using the computer in his living room when he felt a jolt, like electricity. Then he was here; wherever that was. Maybe he'd been tased and kidnapped. For what purpose he couldn't imagine. He wasn't rich or important. He was just a family man, with a wife and two young daughters. A programmer for an upcoming game company. Whatever these people wanted, they must have gotten the wrong man.

"Glad to see you're awake." The man pacing to his left spoke. The man spoke in a manner that made Xander think he was about to be interrogated. He moved his arms, feeling them restrained. His legs were also restrained. He didn't know what these people wanted, but restraints usually meant they were willing to resort to physical harm to get what they wanted. "The effects of the ronel should wear off soon."

"Ronel?"

"Yes. It's a very potent gas; the effects are short lived, about an hour, and allow us enough time to capture intruders. It's developed exclusively by us." There was a hint of pride in the man's voice.

"What do you want from me?"

"That's what I was planning on asking you. What do you want from us?"

Xander shook his head. What else could he want? "To be let go."

Several of the shadows laughed, including the interrogator. "Of course you do. After all, you broke into our secure facility and went through our files."

"What?" Xander had done his fair share of computer hacking, but they had been years ago. Before he had gotten married and started a family. Before he went to work for his current company.

"Don't deny it! We have it recorded!"

"Have what recorded?"

The interrogator held something in front of Xander's face. It looked like a makeup compact, but completely sealed. There were several digital buttons on one side. The man pressed one and a hologram popped up. It showed a man who appeared to be in his thirties enter a room. With a quick look around he goes to an empty desk. The only thing on the desk was a lamp. Pressing a button on the side of the lamp, a holographic screen appeared and a keyboard drawn on the desktop.

The man began to type, bringing information up on the computer. Screens flashed by for a few seconds before the man looked toward the ceiling as gas jets sprayed down on him. He coughs briefly before trying to run for the door. The man made it one step before collapsing, unconscious.

Xander smirked. "That's not me. That looks nothing like me."

"Please," the interrogator scoffed, "don't insult me." Impatient, the interrogator turned the display device toward Xander. In it he could see his reflection, dull and distorted. It was, however, not his. It was the reflection of the man from the hologram, wearing the same disbelieving expression that Xander felt. Why did he look different? Who were these people and where did they get such advanced holographic technology? Deep down, in the pit of his soul, Xander began to feel something. A feeling like he's been ripped from his body and thrust into another. Like he'd been disconnected from his reality and forced to live in this one.

Disconnected. That word stuck in his mind. He had no idea why, but it seemed to be the most important concept in his existence at that moment. More important than being tied to a chair and interrogated. More important than knowing if he was even going to get to see his family, his daughters, again.

The interrogator paced. "Let's start with your name. Who are you?" The interrogator's words brought him back a little.

"Xander Harvard."

"Xander Harvard, what did you break into our facility to steal?"

Xander opened his mouth to deny having done anything. He heard himself say, "I- I don't know."

The interrogator leaned in close, his stinking breath in Xander's face. "What do you mean you don't know? You were there!"

"I don't know!"

"You were the one accessing our files! How can you not know?"

"I don't know! I don't remember!" It was true that Xander had no idea what was going on. He had no memory of what had brought him here, to this reality. The only thing he did know for certain was that he



didn't belong here and needed to find a way back home.

The interrogator walked to the shadowed figures next to the light source. Xander could see them talking briefly before one of them handed something to the interrogator. Slowly the interrogator paced toward Xander again. "You say you don't remember." Xander nodded. "Why don't you tell us what you do remember?"

"The last thing I remember," Xander said, "before waking up here is being at home on my computer. I was checking my email when I felt a jolt of what felt like electricity surge through me. It penetrated my brain like a bullet. Then I woke up here and puked on myself."

The interrogator took two quick steps and leaned in to Xander, their faces now barely a foot apart. "You don't remember breaking into our facility?"

"No!" The man reached around and put his hand on the back of Xander's neck. He felt a pinch, as if the man were digging in with his fingernails. "Ow!" When the interrogator withdrew his hand, however, the pinch remained. "What did you just do to me?"

The man smiled. It was a calculating check-mate smile. "I just attached a truth bug."

"What's a truth bug?"

"It's a device we invented. It injects a tiny amount of neurotoxin directly into the brainstem. You will tell us the truth. You have no choice now." He leaned back, smug. "What is your name?"

Xander rolled his eyes. "Xander Harvard."

"And why did you break into our facility and access our computer system?"

"I didn't. I don't know how to explain this, but I think I've had my personality swapped, or something like that. I don't feel like I'm supposed to be here. My personality, in this body. I don't know how else to explain it."

"You expect me to believe...what? That you have multiple personality disorder, or something like that?"

Xander shrugged, as well as he could tied down. "I don't know. I guess that sounds about right. My personality was pulled from my reality and put here in this body, after the original person broke into your facility and you captured him." Xander thought about his daughters, his wife. In another reality. Would he ever see them again?

It hurt to think about being trapped here, away from his family. Xander knew this was no dream. He didn't know how he knew, but he was sure it was no dream. He wondered what his family would see if they saw him. Was his body comatose, lifeless? Or was the original inhabitant of this body there, living in his reality?

The interrogator walked back to his colleagues. After a lengthy conversation, of which Xander couldn't hear any but whispers, the others left. The light shining in his eyes was turned off and the

interrogator walked back to him. "Okay, Mr. Harvard. We're going to take you back to your holding cell." The interrogator undid his foot straps then the arm straps.

Xander stood up and looked around. He could see the room they were in. It appeared to be a large concrete room about half the size of a football field. "What'll happen to me then?"

"We haven't decided that, yet. If we can find some way to verify your story, we'll probably let you go." The interrogator gestured to a person on the other side of the room. "If you'll go with this man, he'll show you to your cell."

The man approached Xander and he could see the man was wearing a military looking uniform. The configuration looked oddly familiar, but Xander couldn't place it. Xander nodded to the man, who started walking toward a door on the far side of the dark room.

#

The Talon logo projected three dimensionally out from one wall of the conference room. Five women were seated at one end of the table as Sam Neill entered and walked to them. "Ladies, what do you think?"

"I think he's full of shit," one of the women said. The one that had spoken called herself Green. Here they always referred to themselves by the colors of the rainbow: Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, and Blue. Privately he had taken to calling them the Rainbow Women. Their color name also seemed to denote a position of rank amongst themselves.

"He probably is," said the woman who called herself Red. "We're checking on him."

Green snorted a disapproval. "Probably, you say. He got caught and threw out a stupid excuse as to why it wasn't him."

"Exactly," said Blue. "The excuse was stupid. You'd think that if he broke into here, he would have thought about the possibility of getting caught and would have come up with a better excuse."

Green turned to look at her. "Don't tell me you believe this shit about alternate realities."

Blue shrugged. "I believe in multiple personalities." Green rolled her eyes; Blue ignored her. "I've seen people with multiple personality disorder. They sometimes don't know they have it."

"This guy seems to."

"And sometimes they do. Not all of the personalities may be aware of each other, but sometimes one or two are."

"In the mean time," said Yellow, "what should we do? We can hold him for a while, but not indefinitely. We'll have to do something with him. And we'll need to know who sent him and why."

Red turned to Neill. "Find out more about this Xander personality. If he really is a separate personality. He'll probably have his own

strengths that we might be able to use. And if he's lying, we might be able to work it from him that way."

Neill nodded and left the room.

#

The view from Xander's cell was of a barren world, covered in snow, which was still falling in torrents; heavy wind whipped the snow back and forth. He wondered where this was. If he was in a different reality was he even still on Earth? If so, was Earth in this reality the same as his Earth?

Xander had no idea how he even knew he was in a different reality, but he seemed to know it. Call it instinct. Just like the feeling in his head that told him he had to get back home. Reconnected was the term that came to mind.

Xander looked around his cell. It was one of several in Xander's block. When he had asked, the soldier had told him that the facility was built originally to temporarily hold prisoners on their way to a more permanent facility. More than that, such as where they were, he was unable to get from the soldier.

A few minutes later the interrogator entered the cell block and stood in front of Xander. "Mr. Berkeley, I'm Sam Neill."

"Call me Xander. I wish we had met under different circumstances."

Neill nodded. "So do I. What is it you do, where you come from?"

Xander looked at Neill, trying to see if he was serious. "Do you believe me?"

"Just humor me," Neill shrugged.

Xander rubbed his thin beard. It was the first beard he had worn in years, even if, strictly speaking, it wasn't his. "Well, where I come from I'm a programmer. I design games for a living."

Neill nodded. "What kind of life do you live?"

"I- I don't understand what you're getting at. Is this part of the interrogation?"

Neill was shaking his head. "I'm just curious. If you really are who and what you say you are, we might be able to use you. If you don't live in this reality, normally, then you will need some help getting setup here. And Talon is always looking for good recruits."

"Talon?"

"The company I work for. Tell me more about yourself, about your life."

Xander didn't know how much to trust Neill. If this was an alternate reality, as he believed, then there would be no harm in telling him

everything. If it wasn't, or if there was the possibility that anything he said could be used against him in his reality, the he didn't want to tell everything. "I'm a married man. My wife and I live in an apartment in Manhattan."

"Expensive?"

"Yeah. Costs an arm and a leg." It occurred to Xander that if this were a different reality that things might have taken a different turn. "You do have a Manhattan here?" It seemed reasonable to think that since they were speaking English and since things weren't too different that they were probably on Earth.

"Yes, we do," Neill nodded. "New York City is the home of the UNSC, after all. Our Manhattan has been industrialized for almost two hundred years; only a few people actually live there now."

Xander rubbed his beard again. Neill had mentioned the UNSC. He knew that the UN was the United Nations, headquartered in New York. But what was the SC?

In a flash it hit him. The uniforms, the technology, the SC in UNSC. It all began to fit. Xander rubbed his temples with his thumbs.

"Are you okay, Mister Berkeley?" Neill was watching him closely.

"Uh, yeah. I think I'm starting to put it together. Where I am."

"And where is that?"

"You guys are having trouble with the Covenant and the Flood, correct?"

"It's been about a year," Neill said, "but we've had trouble with them in the past. Why do you ask?"

Xander now rubbed his hands together. "If I'm right, where I've been transported to, where we are right now, is in a video game."

"A video game? Such as you design?"

"In a way, yes." Xander nodded. "The game I'm thinking of is not one I've worked on. It's a very well known game called Halo. It's become a whole series of games, in fact."

"Halo?"

"In reference to the Installations."

"I see," Neill said. "To you, then, we're just characters in a game?"

"Not exactly. The Talon corporation is never mentioned in the games. Aside from having the same name as an actor, where I come from, I don't know you at all. And what do you mean it's been a year?"

"I mean up to a year ago we had the Covenant trying to eradicate us, the Flood trying to eradicate everything, and us just trying to

survive. Then something changed. Flood infections started slowing down and the Covenant stopped attacking. Then some of our ships started getting attacked by a new menace.

"The survivors described a large vessel, which appeared to be cyborg in nature, that would latch on to and devour, for lack of a better term, whatever ship it happened upon. To give you some idea of how dangerous these things are, you have to understand how big they are.

"One of the largest spacecrafts we have are the UNSC carriers; they're about three kilometers long. These space kraken, as they've been dubbed, are almost twice as long, if you include the tentacles. They literally grab a spacecraft and pull it in."

"And they attack everyone?" Xander asked.

"Yes."

"Nobody has been able to destroy one?"

Neill shook his head. "Our weapons seem to have no effect. And neither do the Covenant's, apparently."

"Why not hunt them down and destroy them? Take an armada, or something, and go destroy them? If these things are so big, they can't hide easily."

"Because they live in slipspace. They only come out to attack. How they know where to come out, and why they attack in the first place, are unknown at this time. They just come out of slipspace on top of a vessel, latch on, and that's it."

"I didn't know anything could live in slipspace."

"Neither did we. Excuse me a second." Neill seemed to listen to something only he could hear. "Okay, I see. What do you want me to do?" Xander couldn't see any devices, but guessed that Neill was using an earbud or something similar to talk to someone.

When he had finished, Neill turned to him. "Okay, Xander, you say you're a programmer. I might have a job for you."

Xander was surprised. Had they decided to believe his story? It seemed unlikely, but Xander was willing to do almost anything to see that he wasn't locked up in a cell. "Really?"

"Are you familiar with Epsilon?"

Xander shook his head. "No."

"It's a form of programming we use here." Neill walked to a control panel on the other side of the room and pressed a few buttons. In an instant the field securing Xander in his cell shut off. "Come with me. Before we get started there's someone who wants to meet you."

#

Ariana Murphy knew exactly what Xander Harvard was talking about. It

had been her six months ago pulled into the universe of Halo. She had also woken up in custody; she had been arrested the night before for pick pocketing and stealing, from what she could gather. It seemed her double's life was that of a homeless young woman in some backwater city on some backwater planet.

Ariana had managed to get work on a small freighter, doing local runs in the system, where she managed to start saving credits. A month later she had met the woman she now called Red. Red had offered her a job working for a small company, at that time, called Talon. Back then Talon had gotten the contract to handle all UNSC communications.

It seemed they were dealing with an extraordinary amount of data loss due to data spikes; and Talon had been given the contract on the promise they could deal with the data spikes and smooth out the communications problems. And so they had. At least outwardly.

Talon had smoothed out the communications problems, but the data spikes were still there. Talon had sorted the spikes into two categories: regular and massive. Regular spikes were just that: spikes created by a heavy communications volume. Massive spikes carried abnormally large amounts of data in single transmission. In time, Talon had been able to use abandoned communication stations on various planets to sort out the two types of data. Regular data was sent on, while massive data was stored and reviewed.

A few weeks later, Ariana had learned that the massive data they were sorting out were incoming people, just like her. When she confronted Red about what she had learned, Red admitted she knew what was going on, and that Talon's purpose was to try and send these people back home. Lacking the ability to do that, however, Talon wanted to make sure these people didn't end up in an unfamiliar environment, in someone else's life. It was an imperfect system, and people were still being disconnected, but at least some of them would be stopped.

And now, to see someone else from the real world, just like her, get disconnected right in front of her eyes, she knew she had to help him. As far as her colleagues knew, she was from this universe, but that she was a sympathetic person. She had told them about living on the streets, needing help. And now that she was in a position to help, she wanted to. So she convinced the others that Xander needed help and that she would help him, if they gave him a chance.

Now Ariana stood behind the one way mirror and watched as Xander was led into the round interrogation room. He looked around, at the small table, the two chairs, at the still open door, like an animal that was cautiously taking bait. He was quite handsome in the light of the room, she thought, now that he had cleaned up.

Ariana open the door to her left and went into the interrogation room. "Hello, Mr. Harvard. My name is Ariana." She walked up to him and put out her hand.

Xander looked at her hand for a second, perhaps thinking it had some kind of device he couldn't see. She waited. Then he shook it. "Xander Harvard. Call me Xander."

"Xander, welcome to the universe of Halo. I think the first thing you

should know while you're here is you're not the first person to be disconnected."

Xander wasn't able to hide his surprise. "Really?" Undoubtedly he wouldn't have thought about others being disconnected. Ariana hadn't for a few days. Eventually, though, it was an inevitable conclusion.

"Yes. We have no idea exactly how many people have been disconnected, just that it's happened before, and will again."

"So," Xander rubbed his beard, "have you found any of the others?"

Ariana shook her head. "I'm afraid not. You're the first we've been able to get a hold of. To be quite honest, the others don't want to believe that you're from some other kind of reality. I convinced them that I would help you where I could. I have a bit of experience with having to start over here."

"Are you also disconnected?"

Ariana shook her head. "No. I just have some experience at starting with nothing. Which is why I want to help you. And why we want you to help us."

Xander shrugged. "What can I do? I just got here?"

"Everyone has some talent useful here, I believe. You're a programmer." Xander nodded. "Learn to program here. We're trying to trace what packets we detect to both the point of origin and the end point. These packets have to come from somewhere, and they're going somewhere. Which means they have headers."

Xander smiled. "Which means they can be traced."

"Exactly." Ariana gestured to the door, where Neill waited. "Sam will take you to your rooms. After you've rested I'll show you more of the facility. Where you'll be working, what you'll be doing, that kind of thing."

Xander nodded. Ariana watched as Neill led Xander away, down the corridor and around a corner. It was true what she had said about him being the first disconnected they had found. Lost Ones, as she liked to call them. That's what she felt, lost. If Talon had any hope of finding more Lost Ones, it currently lay, in part, in Xander. Talon already had programmers working on the data problem, but there were not enough talented programmers in this universe to do the work. An added benefit was that if they got the chance, they could examine Xander and find out more about why the Lost Ones had this base instinct about being disconnected, and the need to get home. The feeling had grown less in Ariana since her arrival here half a year ago, but it still remained.

#

Montgomery Westlake surveyed the white mountain rising in front of him. He stood at the base, looking up toward the peak. It was ringed with clouds; Westlake could see the clouds dropping snow.

Westlake fingered the com device on his left arm. "Lander to orbiter, I've found the landing zone. I'm sending coordinates now." His breath turned to icy mist instantly as it left his mouth. Here, at the polar region of the planet sized moon, the temperature was cold and the magnetic field was strong.

"Roger that, lander." Carter's voice crackled a bit as he acknowledged. "Come on home."

"Copy that. See you at supper."

## 5. Relay

**\*\*Chapter 5**  
**>Relay<strong>**

"Xander?"

Xander heard Ariana to his right, but all he saw were boxes of glowing code in a flat virtual landscape. It had been a shock to him when he placed the light metal helmet over his head and felt it contract. Even after Ariana had warned him it would, he was still afraid it would tighten too much. His worries were unfounded, fortunately, when it stopped at snug.

"Yes?" He continued manipulating the boxes, the code in them, and the virtual strings that connected them. He couldn't see Ariana without opening his eyes, but he still could talk to her.

"Xander, we're sending some coders off world to meet up with UNSC soldiers. We're activating more relay stations and we need coders there to program the stations to filter and send us packets of a suspicious nature."

Xander opened his eyes and looked at Ariana. The virtual world disappeared, replaced by Ariana and the room in the real world around him. Six months he had been here, and the entire time he had been on this planet. The only place worth visiting, that was close by, was the abandoned Covenant-Forerunner structure at the bottom of the snowy mountain which Talon called home. While Xander had enjoyed going there, several times, and looking at the sky, he had wanted to see more of this reality for a couple of months now. He had told Ariana as much on several occasions.

"I've picked a couple of our best coders," Ariana said, "including you, to go, if you want. I figured you wouldn't say no."

Xander smiled from ear to ear. Of course he wasn't going to say no! "When do I leave?"

"In a week. You'll be meeting a transport down at the relics. A drop ship will take you to the UNSC Packers, where you'll be teamed up with two marines. Then you'll be dropped off at a planet with a relay station. Reactivating and programming the relay should take about a day, so you'll be there a while."

"What are the marines for?" The only reason he would need to be accompanied by marines is for protection. No doubt he could be taught how to bring a relay online. It had taken him just a couple of weeks



to learn Epsilon programming, surely it was easier to press a button and do some programming to an old system.

Ariana shrugged. "The relays are under UNSC command, and they won't let us reactivate them without marines present."

"Sounds like they're worried about some information falling into the wrong hands."

"Probably."

#

The winds were blowing the snow around in torrents as Byron Roth waited at the base of the mountain with the other programmers from Talon. Like them, he was waiting for the UNSC transport. Unlike them, his mission was going to be different.

For the previous several months he had been working himself into Talon, trying to find out what they were doing. How Rick Carter had learned of the Talon base, he didn't know. Carter had come to him several months ago and tasked Roth with finding out what Talon was up to. Carter was sure it had something to do with people being disconnected, but needed someone on the inside to find out exactly what they were up to.

In the months that Roth had been with Talon, his knowledge of UNSC hardware had proved to his advantage as he and others worked to track data packets which Talon thought were people being disconnected. What made them think of that possibility, and why they were even interested, was yet another mystery to him.

Now Roth waited in the blowing snow not far from the Forerunner structure at the foot of the mountain with a dozen other Talon programmers, hearing the Pelican drop ship approach through the clouds, before seeing it finally burst through and land a few meters away. It was a tricky landing, with the snow reducing the visibility. It got him thinking about another Pelican.

Carter and Westlake had gone looking for the Pelican that carried Anna and the two UNSC officers. And they had found it a few miles out of the city, crashed, as they had hoped. Unfortunately, there had been no sign of anyone. There was a lot of blood, but no bodies. And there had been impressions in the ground not far away that Westlake had been sure were that of another Pelican. At the time there had been only one ship large enough to carry a Pelican, and that had been the Sorrow of Souls. Westlake assured Carter that he had men on the Sorrow that could monitor Anna and her friends. And intervene if necessary. As yet, though, that had not been necessary.

The bay door of the Pelican dropped down and a young woman, her long hair blowing wildly, emerged. She waved her arm, indicating that everyone should board. "All right, everyone," Roth heard her shout above the storm, "inside before we freeze our fucking asses off."

As the Talon programmers entered the Pelican, one of them caught Roth's eye. There was nothing unusual about his appearance, but he was acting excited, as if this were his first trip into space. In this day and age almost everyone had the opportunity to go into space. Being that excited about it meant he came from somewhere in

which he had never expected to leave the surface of a planet. And Roth had met only a small group of people that had been so excited about it.

The trip itself was an unexciting one to everyone, except the man that Roth was watching, who couldn't stop smiling and holding his chairs struts for dear life. It seemed funny to Roth that such an ordinary task could be so exhilarating.

On board the UNSC Packers the Talon programmers stood in a line in the massive bay as ships floated by. Having been in several large ships, the bay didn't impress Roth much. Several of the others, including the man Roth suspected of being disconnected, were looking around.

"Welcome, everyone, to the UNSC Packers," the woman from the Pelican said. "Here each of you will be teamed up with two Marines who will accompany you on your missions."

#

Xander Harvard was so preoccupied taking in the sights around him that he barely heard a word the woman had said. He already knew he was going to be teamed up to go on missions. He vaguely heard a bit about being given rooms during his stay. He was so preoccupied that when his name was called he almost missed it.

Several Talon programmers had already been teamed up and were getting to know their partners as Xander was introduced to two young women. The blonde with shoulder length hair introduced herself as Amanda Wolfe. What appeared to be acid scars ran from the right side of her face, starting just below her ear, down into her uniform.

"Maggie Fogg," the other woman said, shaking his hand. Her short red hair and dark brown eyes were a stark contrast to her pale skin. Xander smiled. They were like real version of Japanese anime characters.

"What's funny?" asked Amanda in her deadpan expression. She seemed to have little emotion, heightening the impression.

Xander shrugged. "Just having an anime moment."

For a second both of the women looked at him, seeming to not comprehend. Then Maggie began laughing.

"Wow! I never thought of that!" Maggie said.

Amanda looked from Xander to the laughing Maggie. "What's anime?"

#

Xander Harvard. Byron Roth would have to remember that name. Twenty five billion people and Roth met three who had been disconnected. That would be a hell of a coincidence, if he believed that it was a coincidence. More likely, he thought, it was hundreds or thousands disconnected.

"Byron Roth!"

He followed the woman to two familiar men. She 'introduced' him to Carter and Westlake. Carter had said they would meet him, though Roth had no idea how he had arranged it.

"Anything interesting?" Carter asked.

"Yes, actually. See the man talking to the blonde and the red head?"

"What about him?"

"His name is Xander Harvard. I think he's a disconnected."

Carter looked at him as if Roth should know for sure whether or not the man Harvard was disconnected. "You think he's a disconnected?"

"I've never actually talked to him," Carter said, "but he was acting...funny on the trip up. Like someone who has never experienced space travel before."

"So, what do you want us to fucking do about it?"

Carter shrugged. "That's up to you. I just thought I'd tell you about him before I moved on to telling you what Talon is really doing."

"Which is?" Carter asked, before Roth even had a chance to say.

"Trying to save the disconnected."

"How?"

"As you know," Roth said, "the military is reactivating arrays to channel the increased network traffic. From their point of view, that is all. Talon just happens to have the best programmers for that job. Talon, however, has been preparing for something like this. I don't know who they have on the inside, but they have the ear of someone high up. Possible in the O.N.I. All I know is they've sent their best programmers to not just reactivate arrays, but to reprogram them to intercept what they call suspicious data packets. Apparently these packets are supposed to be the digitized form of humans from the real world."

#

Twenty minutes later, when everyone had been introduced to their partners, they were taken to a large conference room not far from the hangar. This was a bit disappointing for Xander, who had hoped to see more of the ship. It was, after all, his first trip into space.

He'd seen various segments of corridor in the Halo games, but here he could feel the world. He could smell the grease and cleaning chemicals, the people walking by. Their conversations were random, not prescribed. He put his hand against the wall and felt the cool metal beneath his fingers. He could feel the imperfections created by machining and routine cleaning.

Xander felt a presence next to him and turned to see Amanda looking at his hand touching the wall. "Is there something wrong with the wall?"

"No. It's just," he hesitated, not wanting to tell her it was his first time going into space, something that in this universe was routine, "my first time on one of these big beasts. I was hoping to see more of her."

"We should hurry," Maggie said. "The meeting is about to start."

Xander, Maggie, and Amanda took seats at one end of a long table. A man in uniform stood at the other end; a holographic projection of the UNSC emblem slowly rotated in the air behind him. The woman who had brought them here and paired them up came in last and closed the door.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Talon, welcome to the USNC Packers. For those that don't know me, I am Captain Mann. I'll try to keep this meeting brief. You all know why your here, so I'll not waste time going over that again."

Captain Mann picked up a stack of folders at the end of the table that Xander hadn't noticed on entering. "In each folder is information pertaining to the site you will be activating. When I call your name, please come up and get yours."

#

Icarus Chi Beta, Icarus for short, was every bit as inhospitable as the report made it seem, and then some. Spending its entire existence in the dark, Icarus was a wandering planet. Ten light years from the nearest star, it was amazing to Xander that anyone would have built any kind of facility out here.

"Now I know why they haven't used this place in years," he said. Standing on the surface it felt as if the cold were penetrating his suit. There was no atmosphere to speak of.

"The facility is this way," Amanda said, pointing her flashlight at the ground in front of her. A series of dim blue lights flashing in sequence ran in the direction of the facility. Maggie and Xander lit their flashlights and joined Amanda.

Although the lights ran just a few yards, it was impossible to see the facility. Looking into the sky, Xander could see what appeared to be a void of black blocking the stars and galaxy behind. It would be scary, he thought, to have to work here for any long period. While he once considered himself a creature of the night, before his first daughter had been born, he had never been someone who enjoyed total darkness. His writer's imagination would get the better of him. He was glad to have Amanda and Maggie with him, if only to affirm his sanity. He was going to need it over the next day or so.

"Just a minute," Amanda said as they stepped inside. Shining his flashlight around Xander saw black computer consoles and blacker screens. He and Maggie waited while Amanda wove her way around a few consoles and to a panel in one wall. Xander couldn't tell exactly what she was doing, but after a few seconds lights came on and the

computers began to boot.

Only a handful of lights worked, giving the room an office-at-night look. Looking outside he saw no lights, just the blue flashes that led them there.

"We should get to work," Amanda said. She was standing by a ramp leading down. Xander looked at the running computers here with them, wondering why he couldn't just work from here. Perhaps seeing his expression, Amanda answered him. "The computer core is downstairs. You'll need to access it directly to make the modifications."

At the bottom of the ramp was a long corridor, overhead pipes and cables running its length. A large thick-looking metal door marked the other end. Like his anime moment, this seemed surreal. Someone had a sense of humor. Maybe it was God. Maybe some writer playing on stereotypes. He would have laughed here, too, if he had felt more comfortable in this place.

The room lit up as the door opened. It was about the size of a small apartment, Xander guessed. Several dozen towers were spaced evenly around the room. One of the walls was lined with cabinets. Xander guessed they were full of tools that would be necessary to maintain the servers.

He followed Amanda and Maggie to a server at the far end of the room. Opening the front a holographic keyboard and monitor appeared. Xander recognized the finger sized square opening directly beneath the keyboard as the universal access port.

Xander opened his kit and found the finger sized universal memory stick that served as a Halo version of a USB flash drive. A program appeared on the screen and Xander typed the appropriate commands to begin the process of updating the station's software.

While waiting for that program to finish Xander began working on restoring the station's air supply. According to the computer, the reserve tanks were still just over half full, which would be enough to get air to the computer room, the hall, and the entry work area.

#

Maggie took off her helmet and took a deep breath of the stale air now filling the facility's control room. It was a something she had experienced only a couple of times before, but she would never forget.

"What do you think?" she asked Amanda. She ran a hand through her wet hair. Whenever she had to wear a helmet for a long period of time her head always sweat.

Her question had not been about her hair. It had been in reference to the not so legal, but highly profitable, operation they had going with a man named Bryant Mathis.

A few months ago, while on patrol of some back water world, Amanda and Maggie received reports of illegal back room fighting. The kind that usually end in someone being killed. Dressed in plain clothes it didn't take them long to find a man named Bryant Mathis.

Bryant Mathis was a giant of a man. At seven foot two, three hundred twenty pounds, he was a physically imposing person. And he had the skill to match. In his younger years he had been a wrestler, entertaining billions. As his body got to the point where the abuse was too much, he turned to back-room fighting.

"The pay's not as good," he said. "Not like I need it, though. I'm already a billionaire several times over. No, for men like me, it's the enjoyment I get from hurling my opponent twenty feet through the air. The feeling I get when I strangle, or slice, or stab someone. Knowing that my opponent's life, or more often death, is in my hands. It's a feeling better than the highest high I've ever had. Better than the best sex I've ever had."

Watching their first death match, Maggie was astonished at how much money was actually being thrown around. With a bit of planning, Maggie and Amanda could get rich from this alone. Forget the pay, although decent, the UNSC was giving them. They could retire early and happy with what they could earn here.

She turned to Amanda during the fight and asked her thoughts on the subject. After a few seconds of silence, in which Maggie could see her partner's gears turning, Amanda had simply said "That's cool."

In their meeting with Bryant, Maggie told him they could get him a fairly steady supply of people. "Vagabonds, drug dealers, UNSC prisoners on death row. Any type of person you want, we can get."

Bryant was understandably suspicious. "Who did you say you are?"

Maggie smiled. Amanda's expression didn't change. "We didn't," Maggie said. "Suffice it to say, we're just a couple of women looking to have some fun. And make a little money at it."

Maggie could see Bryant's wheels turning now. Undoubtedly he was thinking they were UNSC soldiers, but that they were not interested in shutting him down. Otherwise the place would already have been crawling with a platoon of soldiers from the nearby base. And if he disagreed with them, that could very well happen. It was no surprise, then, when he agreed to bring them aboard.

Now, months later, and thousands of credits richer, Maggie was running a hand through her damp hair, thinking of selling Xander to Bryant. He didn't act like much, but Maggie could tell from the way he carried himself that he was probably a good fighter. She would have to check his background when they got back to the Packers.

Again she waited for Amanda's answer, watching her face as the mental wheels spun. It didn't take long. "Let's do it."

#

Bryant grinned his gaped tooth grin on seeing them. Maggie grimaced inwardly. Though she would never tell him, Bryant constantly annoyed her. Every time they met he tried to get her into bed.

"My beauties! Have a seat!" Bryant motioned with his long meaty arms at the chairs opposite his desk.

Maggie sat down, accepting the drink Bryant poured for her. Amanda, as usual, stood behind her, hands folded in front of her. After the second meeting Bryant had stopped trying to put moves on Amanda. Even to someone as dense as Bryant it was obvious that he was not going to get anywhere with Amanda.

"What have you got for me today?" Bryant asked as he filled Maggie's shot glass a second time.

Maggie sat back and slowly crossed her legs, letting Bryant enjoy the view of her dressed in cutoff shorts and a tight shirt. There was no way in hell she would ever get undressed for him, for any reason, but it never hurt to make the business a little less business like.

"A thief who managed to get himself a programming position at Talon. You've heard of them?"

Bryant slowly nodded. "They're the ones that got the UNSC communications contract, right?"

"Right," Maggie said. "We were assigned to escort one of these programmers to an abandoned array facility to reactivate it. It wasn't until after we returned to our ship that we were able to dig up his entire background, but while watching him we noticed the way he carried himself."

Using the resources available to her, Maggie ran an extensive background check on Xander, whose real name turned out to be Joey Tristan. The more she dug, the more she liked him as a candidate for Bryant.

Joey Tristan, known in his circle as The Executioner, was a professional hacker and murderer for hire. There was almost nothing he would not do. On perhaps his most notorious job he set an apartment building of fire to cover a murder he committed. Over twenty people died and several hundred were left homeless.

Joey had been detained by police only as a material witness. Camera and eyewitness footage placed him at the building, but there were no links to any of the deaths or the fire.

According to the rumors she could get, Joey was hired to break into the Talon facility. Nobody seemed to know why, however. Now here he was, a programmer, and one of their top programmers.

"Mind you," Maggie said, "none of this is official. If anyone could prove anything, he would be rotting away somewhere, if he hadn't been executed."

"I like the sound of this man," Bryant said. "Bring him to me."

## 6. Betrayal

**\*\*Chapter 6**  
**><strong>\*\*Betrayal\*\***

Xander smiled, watching the planet below the Pelican swing into view. This technically marked the end of his first trip into space, he realized.

"You don't get to travel much, do you?" Maggie was watching him. He knew that for her and the others here it was a fact of life that anyone could go into space at almost any time.

Xander shook his head. "No, I don't. And it hasn't gotten old yet." He looked at her. "Thanks for bringing me along."

Maggie shrugged. "As I said, I knew you'd want to get out of there and see the ship and the planet."

Just after the Packers arrived at the planet, Menkar 6, Maggie had come to his room and told him she had heard him mention to Amanda about his desire to see more of the ship. She was taking some shore leave and wondered if he would like a quick tour of the ship before going down with her to the planet.

"It's going to get a little choppy," Maggie said as they entered a dark cloud. "Storm systems around here can get a little rough."

Although bolted down, the two Mongoose ATVs in the back moved around from the turbulence. Thirty seconds later they emerged over a large city that sprawled as far as Xander could see. He couldn't see any individual house, just tall office buildings.

Dominating the skyline were some as tall as a mile, as near as he could guess. They had a slightly rounded shape that conjured up the image of a large black egg. They were transparent at the top, through which Xander could see what looked like land; grass, small trees, maybe a small park or a garden.

Noticing Xander's gaze, Maggie piloted the Pelican over the nearest building, slowing the craft to give Xander a better look.

"Arcos," she said. "A city within a city. People can work and live there and never have to travel anywhere but to another floor."

"I've read about them, but never have I seen one."

Maggie pushed the throttle forward and the Pelican regained speed. As they flew south, according to the compass on the display in front of him, Xander saw the buildings get smaller and smaller until individual houses could be seen in the mix of smaller office looking buildings and what looked like hotels, or what passed for hotels in this universe.

Maggie pointed through the window. "That red building over there is where we'll be landing."

The building was hard to miss: although only five stories tall, it was the only red building in the area. Maybe even the city, for all Xander knew. Most of the buildings he saw were beige or white, with a few black office looking buildings. Further out he could see the edge of the city, and desert beyond.



The Pelican touched down with a soft jolt. Xander followed Maggie as she unfastened her harness and went to the back. As the ramp lowered, letting in a hot breeze, Xander saw now why Maggie had elected to wear shorts and a sleeveless shirt. On the ship, when she had come to his room and invited him to go on this tour with her, he had almost asked if what she was wearing was maybe a little too revealing for an officer, even on leave. Five hundred years into the future, however, there were bound to be some differences; and her attire wasn't too revealing, even by twenty first century standards.

He could see from her demeanor that Maggie was in her element here. This place was, for her, a home.

After unfastening her Mongoose, Maggie slipped it out of gear and rolled it onto the roof of the building. Xander did the same, parking it next to hers.

Maggie took a deep breath. "Smell that fresh desert air. Much better than that recycled shit on the ship." She turned and faced Xander, smiling. The sun shining full on her face was causing her skin to glow. Her auburn hair, dull in the lights of a ship, seemed to be on fire as it moved around in a light desert breeze. Until that moment if anyone had asked how good looking she was, he would have simply said she was pretty. Now she was beautiful. Not in the sense that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her; that spot in his heart was already taken. It was more along the line that she could be a model or actress. "Don't you agree?"

Xander took a deep breath, taking in the aromas of the surroundings, and nodded. "Yes." The air on the planet was filled with different scents. A lot he was familiar with, and a lot he wasn't.

"Isn't it beautiful? Desert," Maggie swept her arm toward the open land a few miles from the building on which they stood, "and city." Now she swept her other arm toward the towers they had just flown over, now miles distant, but still very visible. With her arms outstretched to either side she looked like a hostess presenting something to an important guest.

"Welcome," she said, "to The Bell Tower, in Naileve City."

Xander smiled and bowed slightly. "Very nice. Thank you."

"You liked the presentation?" Maggie lowered her arms.

Xander nodded. "I did."

"I just came up with it," she gave a short dismissing gesture, "spur of the moment."

"You could be an actress. Or a model. You know?"

"Who says I wasn't?"

Who, indeed? Xander had only known her for a few days, and in that time he had only known her as a Marine. This trip was the first time he had gotten to actually know her.

"Were you?"

Maggie turned her head slightly, casting a shadow over part of her face. Between her blowing hair and contrasted face, he couldn't tell, but it appeared as if she was frowning a little.

"There was a time when I was something other than a soldier." She turned her head back to him. The light greater on her face again, he could see the smile was there, but her eyes showed a sadness he hadn't seen in her before. "People change."

He was debating whether to ask about what happened when a section of the roof fell open inward and an elevator carrying a large man rose to the roof. With the heat shimmer it almost looked as if he were rising through the roof.

"Hello, beauty!" the large man said. To Xander he looked like a seven foot cowboy. He tilted his hat back as he walked next to Maggie.

Xander held back a smile as Maggie rolled her eyes.

"Who's your friend?" Bryant asked.

"Xander," Maggie said, "meet Bryant."

Shaking hands with Bryant, Xander could tell he was as powerful as he looked. He appeared to Xander to have been some kind of athlete. "Nice to meet you," Xander said.

"Likewise," Bryant said. "Any friend of Maggie is a friend of mine."

Xander wondered what became of those that weren't friends of Bryant, but decided to not ask.

"Why don't you take your Mongoose," Maggie said, "and go on down, do some exploring? I've got some business to discuss with Bryant. It shouldn't take long."

#

The first thing she remembered was the smell of food. The familiar aroma calling to her, but she couldn't place a name to it.

She opened her eyes. The world seemed wrong to her. All the buildings seemed sideways, and the sky was in front of her. Another part of her brain reactivating told her she was actually laying on her back. It seemed an odd sensation to her. She couldn't remember having ever lay on her back before.

In fact, she couldn't remember much of anything. It was as if she had just been born. At least she could still speak, she thought.

"My name is-"

She felt herself frown. She couldn't remember her name. She knew how to speak. Everything seemed to be coming back to her, so maybe her name would.

A pain â€" more of a sensation â€" shot through her stomach. Hunger, she remembered it being called. Sitting up, she hoped she could

remember how to eat.

Something fell out of the coat she was wearing, landing in her lap. It was a red cover journal, like a diary.

Turning the diary over she found no writing on the outside and decided to open it. Inside she discovered the writing appeared to be upside down. Who would write in such a manner?

Laughing at herself, she realized she was holding the book wrong. Righting the book she opened it again. This time the writing was right side up.

Just inside the cover were the words 'Property of Julie Hymes.' Below the words was a picture of a young woman.

Was that her? Was she this Julie Hymes?

Slowly standing up, she went to the nearest window. The reflection wasn't great, but it was enough to match her face with the picture in the book. She appeared to be this Julie Hymes.

A pain shot through her head like a bullet. She put her hands to her temples and sank to her knees, suppressing a scream. Then it was gone as fast as it came. Some part of her brain had just opened up. A handful of memories rose to the surface.

Julie looked around, remembering where she was. She was in the city of Naileve, on the planet of Menkar 6. She was here to... Well, that memory wasn't one that came to her. She only knew she was here for something important.

"Are you all right?"

Julie looked at the young man standing a few feet away just inside the mouth of the alley. She hadn't noticed him before and wondered how long he had been standing there. Wondered if he had anything to do with her being there in the first place.

"Yeah. I'm-," her stomach growled loud enough for him to hear. "I'm just hungry is all."

The man smiled at her. "Come on, we'll get something to eat." He reached out to her.

Should she trust him? What if he caused her to lose her memories? Surely he would have been gone already. Why would he have come back? She decided to trust him and took his hand.

"I'm Julie."

"Xander. Nice to meet you Julie. Anywhere in particular you want to eat?"

Julie shrugged. "It's my first time here. Wherever you want is fine by me."

Xander smiled. He had a nice smile, disarming, genuine. "My first time here as well. Let's just pick the first place we come across. How's that sound?"

Julie smiled back. "Sounds good to me."

#

Their stomachs full from haas-farat, Julie and Xander decided to walk off the lethargy they felt coming on. Xander had never even heard of haas-farat, much less had any.. To see it reminded her of a large lump of dried brown algae. To taste it was more like ground seasoned hamburger.

Julie was following Xander as they walked back to The Bell Tower. With all the blood flooding his abdomen he was thinking of napping upon returning.

"Who is Maggie?" she asked. "You were about to tell me when we started eating."

Xander ran a hand through his beard. He didn't know where to begin that wouldn't sound like a history lesson. "She's the woman who brought me here. I was doing some work for the UNSC, and she and her partner, Amanda, were assigned to watch me."

"She's not your wife, then? Or girlfriend?"

Xander smiled. "No. She's just a friend. I am married, though." Xander thought about his wife and daughters. It had been almost seven months since he had seen them, even though he thought about them every day. If time passed the same here as in the real world then they would be getting ready to start school. It would be the first time he wouldn't be there to see them off on the first day. It was something he and his wife enjoyed doing.

Xander looked over at Julie. She was reading his face. "It's been about seven months since I've seen her. Or our daughters."

"You've been working for the UNSC that long?"

Xander shook his head. "No. Technically I work for an organization called Talon. They were contracted by the UNSC for communications work. The reason I'm away is I was essentially kidnapped and I have no way back home at this time."

Looking at Julie he could see she wasn't really understanding. "Let's just say it's more complicated than it sounds."

Julie nodded, at least pretending to understand. As she did so, she fell face first onto the pavement with an audible smack.

"You all right?" Xander reached down to help her up and realized she hadn't just tripped, she was unconscious. At the same time, bent over Julie, he head something whiz by his head.

Turning toward where he thought the projectile had come from he saw a masked woman holding a pistol of some kind, dressed in a gray and black ninja like outfit.

In the moment it took him to process this she fired again. This time he felt a dart stick in his chest and the world quickly faded to black as he fell to his knees.

#

Maggie upended the small glass of whiskey, swallowing the contents in one gulp. She placed the glass on his desk where, every few minutes, he would fill it about half full. Over the last half hour she had been drinking and talking business with Bryant. Soon Xander was going to be brought in, so she had pretended to talk business, and let Bryant gaze at her all he wanted. Now, a few shots of whiskey later, she was starting to feel buzzed and was anxious for things to be over with.

Most men, when she was dressed as she was now, couldn't find her eyes if they had a road map. They usually just talked to her breasts and mentally undressed her. In Bryant's case it was good business, a bit of give and take.

It was a shame, then, that she had to get rid of Xander. Talking with him had been mentally refreshing. He never looked anywhere but her face, at least while she could see his eyes.

Bryant leaned forward on his desk. "You know, I can't figure you out."

"Oh? What's to figure out?"

Bryant came around the desk and pulled a chair next to her.

"Every time you come," he said, "you always wear those tight shorts and what seems like a shirt that's one size too small for you. I get you drunk and pay you, handsomely too, for your catches, and you still refuse to hop in with me."

Maggie laughed. "Well, it's a give and take. I give you people for your not-so-little operation and a good look at something else you'll never get, and you give me booze and money. Sounds like a pretty good trade to me."

Bryant grinned his wide gaped tooth grin and leaned toward her, putting a hand on her leg. She could smell his whiskey breath and see the color in his cheeks. Her smile and gaze never faltered, but for a second she had the thought that if he wanted to treat her like a rag-doll and just rape her, there was nothing she could do.

"Not even once?" he asked.

It was Maggie's turn to lean to Bryant. "Not even once. Did it ever occur to you that maybe I don't go for the opposite sex?"

"It has," Bryant said, slowly nodding. "You wouldn't be the first lez to enjoy my company. There's nothing like putting the toys away for a short time and having something real."

Maggie was deciding which response to use when the door to the office swung open. Maggie turned and saw the woman in gray and black, carrying two unconscious bodies. She entered and sat both bodies on the love seat next to the door. Bryant went over and examined Xander.

To Maggie, Xander appeared unharmed. The woman, on the other hand,

had a large red mark on her forehead and a broken nose which had bled considerably down the front of her clothes, and all over the woman.

Bryan pointed to the woman, whose nose was still leaking. "Who's this?"

"We'll talk about her later," she said. "For now, let's talk about my delivery of Xander."

Bryant walked to his desk and unlocked the top drawer. Inside, as Maggie knew, were two blue disposable credit chips; one for her, and one for Amanda. Bryant handed these across the desk to Maggie, who handed one to her still anonymous accomplice.

Maggie moved to one of the windows of the office, overlooking the arena below. She could see it was being prepared for another fight. Behind her she heard the hiss of an air pistol and the accompanying groan of Bryant's chair as he slumped into it.

"I think," Maggie said, "it's time we renegotiate our deal."

"What did you do to me?"

Maggie walked to Bryant and sat on one of his huge legs. She leaned in and placed an arm around his neck. Hugging him as she was she could feel his quick heart beat and his huge lungs moving in and out. He was cool on the outside, but inside he was scared.

"It's just a quick acting neurotoxin. Nothing to worry about. Xander and," she waved an arm at Julie, "who ever the fuck that is got the doses that knock you out in a second or two." Here she ran a hand down his chest to his stomach.

"You, on the other hand, I wanted conscious. What she shot you with just paralyzes your limbs. I didn't want you to throw us through a wall when I told you I was taking over your business."

Maggie went to the woman and pulled her hood off. Amanda shook her head and ran a hand through her hair, moving it from her face. Maggie looked at Bryant and felt a smile creep it's way across her face. It was, she felt, the cunning smile of a winner.

And why not? They now controlled Bryant's business. She hadn't spent all of her encounters just giving Bryant a good show and taking his money. She had been learning the various aspects of his game.

"Let's do it now," Amanda said. "I want him to watch."

"You're a sadistic fuck, you know that?" Maggie laughed and kissed Amanda. "I like the way you think."

Amanda reached around Maggie's neck and kissed her. Maggie felt her tongue work its way into her mouth and returned the kiss, reaching around to unzip Amanda's outfit.

## 7. Intertwined

>Intertwined<strong>

Rick Carter entered the cramped, stuffy hotel room shortly after dark, half expecting to find Julie Hymes waiting for him. Several days earlier, when The Voice had contacted him to let him know of Julie's disappearance, it was the first place which came to mind.

Julie had been the one to greet him on his arrival almost eight months ago. He had, she told him, been transported from the real world to a digital world.

"I was brought here by Matriarch," Julie told him, "to help her repair her defenses against hackers. But, we still need more help."

"Who's Matriarch?" Carter heard himself asking. It wasn't the dominant question on his mind, but if this Matriarch was the one responsible for his feeling of being disconnected, then he was very interested in learning everything about her.

"Matriarch," Julie said, "is, essentially, the controller of Haloverse."

He had been skeptical, naturally, and thought he must be having a dream. He was in bed at home and would wake soon. Until then he would play along.

"Right," he said. "And I'm here to help you help her. Correct?"

Julie nodded then, over the next couple of hours, laid before him all that happened in the month since she had arrived. How Matriarch pulled her in and how they've been working together to bolster Matriarch's defenses against hackers from the inside.

Shortly after her arrival, Julie had been given complete access to certain code to modify. When it became apparent that one person from the real world would not be enough, Matriarch and Julie agreed that they should bring in more real world coders, as many as necessary, to help them. He was, so far, the first. If his talent wasn't enough, more people could be brought in.

It upset him at first, the thought of being kidnapped and taken from friends and family. Julie assured him that the people brought in could be sent back home at will. She had assured him that those brought in would also be carefully selected so that the impact of being here would be very small, if any, on their personal lives.

Carter walked to the window. Down below he saw the open cafe where he and Julie had supper on the day they decided to take control of the Haloverse from Matriarch.

A storm was rolling in from the west and the smell of rain was in the air. Streams of light shot from the edges of the clouds as the sun set behind. The sound of thunder rolled through the air as Carter undid the top couple of buttons on his shirt. Hot and muggy was not his preferred weather conditions. Sweat was forming on his neck and face.

Without warning the clouds burst and the rain fell in sheets, instantly drenching everything. Carter and Julie bolted for the hotel lobby, jamming their way inside with a handful of weather escapees.

They were still laughing as they entered Julie's hotel room and looked at each other. Carter watched the water roll down Julie's bare arms and legs. Her hair plastered to her face and neck, she was the most beautiful woman he had seen in a long time.

Carter grabbed Julie by the shoulders and gently pushed her into the wall. As she began to protest he covered her mouth with his. There was an awkward moment as she froze, unsure of how to react, then her arms reached around his body and pulled him closer, returning his kiss.

"We shouldn't," Julie started to say and began to push him away when they broke the kiss.

"It's just a game," Carter said. "Let's just have some fun."

Carter stepped away from the window and left the room, briefly glancing at the section of wall where they shared that fateful kiss. He had expected her to return here, as memorable as this place was for both of them.

Downstairs, Carter approached the desk clerk and flashed a chameleon badge set to look like a local police badge. Then in one fluid motion he put the badge away and brought out a holocrystal, showing the clerk an image of Julie.

Not wanting to use his real name during not so legitimate investigations, he used the first name to come to mind.

"I'm Detective Deckard," he said, groaning inwardly at his inability to devise good fake names. "I was wondering if you've seen this woman in the past few days."

The clerk scrutinized the hologram then shook her head.

"Can't say I have. It's possible someone else has."

Carter set the holocrystal on the desk between them, deactivating it.

"We're investigating her disappearance," he said. "I'd be grateful if you'd show it around and ask about her. Maybe have everyone keep an eye out for her and let me know if she turns up here. There's a number on the crystal if you need to reach me."

"Sure, we can do that," she said, placing the crystal in one of her pockets.

"Thank you." Carter smiled at the woman and walked across the lobby.

Carter could not think of any other significant places that Julie might end up at, but he had his men on the lookout for her. If she were to be spotted, he would know.



#

Xander sat up and checked his surroundings. The last thing he remembered was seeing Julie face plant into the sidewalk not far from the restaurant. After that, nothing.

Now he was in what looked to be a prison cell. To his left and right were more cells; what looked to be at least half a dozen. They were not the kind found in a modern prison, but the kind with bars, reminiscent of old movies.

To his right was the man Xander had met briefly when arriving with Maggie, Bryant. As Xander sat up Bryant turned to face him. Xander could see cuts and bruises on his face, some covered by bandages. His clothes were torn and bloodied. It looked as if he had been in a barroom brawl.

Looking left, Xander saw Julie sitting on her bed. Little bits of cotton protruded from her nostrils. Her nose was swollen and red, and just a little crooked. He could see dark streaks on her face where she had been crying, and a large blood stain on the front of her shirt. The tears were gone, but her eyes were still swollen.

Xander stood and went to the bars separating his cage from Julie's.

"Hey, how are you?"

Julie shook her head. "I don't know."

"What do you remember?"

"We were walking," Julie said, "after eating, and then I woke up here."

"Do you know where we are?"

Julie shook her head. Xander decided it was best to let Julie rest a little bit to get over the shock. He wasn't going to get much from her in her current state of mind. He moved to the other side of the cell to talk to Bryant. Seeing Bryant reminded Xander that he had arrived with Maggie. Double checking the cells around them, he saw no sign of Maggie. Or anyone else.

"What are we doing here? And where's Maggie?"

Xander heard footsteps on the other side of a door not far away. It appeared to be an exit, one of several, to the cell block they were in.

"Speak of the devil," a woman on the other side of the door said, "and he shall appear."

The door opened and Xander was a little relieved to see that it was Maggie who had spoken the line. His relief was fleeting, however, for looking into her eyes he knew she had some role in placing the three of them in their cages. The serene, almost sad, expression he had seen shortly after landing was gone; it was now a dark, brooding, conniving glare.

"Speak of the demoness, and she is here."

The corners of Maggie's mouth pulled upward and she laughed in a manner that reminded Xander of an animal who cornered its prey and was savoring the moment before the pounce.

"You drugged us and put us in here?" Xander asked.

"Yep. Though I can't take all the credit. I had some help."

Maggie walked toward Xander's cell, running her hand across the bars of the empty cages. A masked woman entered the cell block and followed several steps behind her. The memory of what happened after Julie fell to the pavement came back to Xander.

As the accomplice reached up to remove her mask, Xander already knew who was behind it. Having set this up long before departing for the planet, Maggie sent her ahead to get ready for Xander's arrival. He was not surprised, then, to see Amanda's short blonde hair and emotionless gaze.

"Why me? And when?" Xander asked.

Maggie turned to Amanda inquisitively.

"I think that's the first time we've been asked that," Maggie said.

"It is," Amanda agreed.

Maggie walked closer to Xander's cell.

"Usually we don't get questions," Maggie said. "We just drugged them and brought them to Bryant here."

Xander looked again at Bryant locked in the cell next to him. It seemed any arrangement they had was now over. The hostile glare Bryant was giving Maggie and Amanda was confirmation enough.

"As for why you," she said. "You happened to be the right person in the right place this time around. Once we use the excuse that you wandered off during one of the regular sand storms that hits this area, nobody will spend a long time looking for you. People disappear on a regular basis in this section of the city."

"What are you going to do with us?"

"I'm glad you asked," she said, her cunning smile returning.

Using a keypad on the outside of the cell door, Maggie unlocked it and pulled it open.

"Follow me."

Amanda stayed behind Xander as he followed Maggie toward a pair of doors large enough to drive a truck through. As they drew closer he heard a sound which reminded him of a sports stadium filled with people.

Xander squinted in the sunlight streaming in as Maggie pushed the large doors open. The roar of a large audience filled his ears without the doors to block it, increasing to a deafening level as Maggie sauntered into the light. Seeing her now brought back memories of standing on the roof of the hotel just after landing. Here, as then, she was at her best.

As his eyes adjusted, Xander saw a small arena, half the size of a football field, with stands to his right. Two tiers of screaming people were illuminated by bright sunlight streaming in through a large glass dome above.

Putting her hand on his back, Amanda pushed Xander forward. The roar of the crowd intensified as he emerged into the light. Listening to them, seeing their screaming faces and waving arms, he knew he was about to take part in some spectacle designed to enthrall them. If the recent and still healing bruises and cuts on Bryant were any indication, he was about to be forced into a fight.

"The arena," Maggie said as Xander approached, yelling to be heard. Between determining whether he could take Maggie or Amanda in a fight and the raw power of the crowd he barely made out what she was saying.

"Here you will fight," she said. "The rules are simple. Kill or be killed. There is no other way to win. Or lose."

Xander felt his stomach shift and move at the word kill. He had expected a fight, but not for such high stakes. With life on the line, he knew that Maggie and Amanda were not going to fight.

He hoped his opponent was a little less of a fighter than Bryant's previous opponent. It had been years since he had been in any kind of fight, and certainly he had never killed anyone.

"Your opponent," Maggie said, gesturing to the far wall behind her.

A door, identical to the one the three of them entered the arena through, opened and a young woman emerged. Xander noticed she limped slightly. She had the look of someone who had been here before.

"Your weapons," Maggie explained as Xander's opponent walked across the arena toward him, "are a baseball bat and knife. There are two of each, on the wall to your right."

At the base of the stands to his right, beneath the frenzied audience, Xander saw two baseball bats hanging ten feet apart, each paired with a long dagger.

Maggie stepped to the side as his opponent approached, allowing them to square off, like boxers before a match. There was no hatred or malice in the woman's eyes. It was just another fight, another day on the job, for her. Xander hoped he wasn't showing how afraid he really was, but doubted it was well hidden.

"The final rule," Maggie said. "Five wins and you walk away. We open the door and kick you out into the cold, hard world, where you will have to find your own way home. Now, go!"

There was a flash of motion and something hit Xander in the face, below his left eye, then he felt himself hit the ground. As he blinked to clear the floating dots in his vision he realized that, although her legs may be slow, his opponent's hands weren't.

Xander blinked again and looked around to make sure he wasn't about to get jumped. To one side he saw the still unimpressed Amanda, and Maggie enjoying the spectacle. To the other side he saw the woman limping her way toward the weapons as fast as her feet would carry her.

Xander shook his head and stood up. His equilibrium was still off, but he knew he could get to one set of weapons at the same time as this woman whose only goal was to kill him and win her freedom.

He had been hoping it wouldn't come to killing. Although not the greatest fighter, he had hoped he would be able to fight any opponent into some kind of stand-off, or at the most make them submit.

After seeing the blood drying on Bryant, however, and this woman limping toward one set of weapons, he knew that was no longer a possibility. Even if he could disarm her and overpower her, he was certain that one of them was going to die; even if a reason had to be invented. Maggie and Amanda wanted to see someone die. The screaming red faces of the audience wanted to see someone die.

Xander began moving as fast as his shaky legs would carry him. Certain as he was that one of them was going to die, he wanted to make sure it wasn't him.

#

Ariana checked her watch for the second time in ten minutes. Since his arrival here, she and Xander had been in almost constant contact. She was glad to have someone who could talk about things she was familiar with, without thinking of those things as ancient history.

Xander seemed glad to have someone who didn't regard him with constant suspicion and disdain; even if, from his point of view, she was just a creation of this universe.

In all the time she had been trapped here, Ariana never told anyone that she had come from the real world. She had repressed the feeling of being disconnected and moved on, as she usually did in her other life.

Xander, with a wife and daughter, as she discovered, had every reason to want to get back home. Ariana made sure it was as strong the day he left to reactivate the communications facility as the day he arrived.

What Talon was doing, Ariana told him, was to make sure that people who were disconnected would not be brought in, but sent straight back home. The truth was that was part of what they were doing. From Talon's point of view, they were correcting a major influx of data traffic from seemingly nowhere through the UNSC communications network, until the source could be located and stopped. Other options, including attempts to block the traffic and filter it out, had failed.

So Talon had been contracted to help correct the problems. Their plan was to send teams of engineers to reactivate disused communications facilities temporarily to alleviate the strain all the extra data was putting on current resources.

Xander had been among those engineers, personally chose by her, to keep him from going stir crazy from coding all day. He had stayed in regular contact aboard the Packers, the only break being when he was at the facility and unable to contact her.

When Xander contacted her to inform her that he was going down to the planet, Menkar 6, she was glad that he was getting out and doing something to take his mind off going home.

Now the Packers was preparing to leave Menkar 6 and return its precious cargo of engineers to Talon. Ariana was expecting Xander to contact her and let her know he had safely returned to the Packers and was ready to come back, as he did after leaving Icarus Chi Beta. She had heard nothing from him, however, and was beginning to worry.

Ariana pressed the button on the front of the holocomm on her writing desk. It was time to start making calls.

#

Xander collapsed on top of the woman, his hands still tight around her neck. The look on her face, a mixture of relief and surprise, revealed to him the last things to go through her mind before he had crushed her wind pipe.

His side began to ache where the woman had driven it to the hilt as they went to the ground seconds before. Looking at it, Xander saw her hand still gripping the handle.

As he pried his aching fingers from her throat he began to cry, more from remorse than the dagger or the other injuries sustained in the short and brutal fight that had ended in his first kill.

Xander heard footsteps and looked up to see two medics rushing toward them. Seeing the bruises and indentations his fingers had left, it took them no time to determine that she was dead.

One of the medics unfolded the woman's finger's from the knife and together they began to help him up. He wanted to tell them to leave him there to die as well. During the fight he had felt something awaken inside him; something from deep down that rose to the surface as the fight turned against him. It had saved his life, but at the expense of another.

Never before had Xander been in a position like this. His complete lack of control in the final moments of the fight had shocked him as much as what he had done. Now he was unsure of himself, afraid he might become the monster again at any moment.

Limping and bleeding, Xander allowed the medics to take him out of the arena to a small medical bay, where they began to cut off his clothes.

As one medic crossed the room to dispose of his clothes and began to prepare a vial for what appeared to be a subcutaneous injector, the other leaned in to check the gash on the side of his head.

"I know who you are," the medic quietly said.

The words registered slowly in Xander's brain, his thoughts were still on the fight and the change that came over him.

"What?"

"I said I know who you are. You're Joey Tristan. We worked together a few years ago, though I doubt you'd remember."

Xander shook his head. "Afraid I don't."

Xander had come to accept that the body he currently inhabited was not his and belonged to someone that had lived a life in this universe. He also knew that everyone he had ever met didn't know about the personality switch. Without the time to prove he was another person, highly unlikely to begin with if his first day was any indication, he decided to play along.

The medic across the room was almost finished preparing a second vial. With no time to chat, Xander felt certain the medic examining him would not question him to find out the entire history of how he had gotten here.

"Can you do me a favor?" Xander asked. Without giving Joey's old acquaintance time to say no, he continued. "I just want you to pass a message to someone. Think you can do that?"

Still pretending to examine Xander, the medic nodded.

"I need you to contact a woman named Ariana Murphy. Just tell her where I am and what the situation is."

As the second medic finished preparing the second vial and returned the medicines to the cabinet, Xander gave his new friend Ariana's holocomm number. He wasn't sure they weren't working for Maggie and Amanda, but he had to try to get a message out.

End  
file.